Boku wa Tomodachi ga Sukunai Volume 07

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These are novel illustrations that were included in Volume 7

【著者】

平坂読
ひらさか・よみ

業界の片隅でボソボソと息を続けるライトノベル作家。
アニメ化しても友達が少ないことに定評がある。

【イラストレーター】

ブリキ

朝起きるだけでも息が切れます……歳ですね。

カバーイラスト／ブリキ　装丁／blue

MF文庫 J
ひ-02-25

僕は友達が少ない⑦
平坂読
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メディアファクトリー
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僕は友達が少ない⑦

羽瀬川小鳩の誕生日パーティーも無事に（？）終わり、ふたたび学園祭に備えての活動を開始する隣人部のメンバーたち。紆余曲折の末、文化祭の出し物の内容は映画作りに決定し、脚本は夜空が担当することに。だが、やたらと小鷹との過去の関係を強調する夜空と他の女子部員たちとの間に不穏な空気が流れ始める。そんなおり、小鷹と星奈との間にも実は『特別な関係』があったことが発覚し、さらには隣人部のジョーカー、志熊理科までもが動き出す。大人気残念系ラブコメディ第７弾、リア充たちの祭典を前にして物語はついに佳境を迎える……かも。

DVD付き特装版

僕は友達が少ない 7

平坂読 yomi hirasaka
【illustrator ブーキ】

MF文庫 J

僕は友達が少ない 7

平坂読 Yomi Hirasaka
【illustrator ブーキ】

隣人部チアリーディング（妄想）

にゃ～♥
うにゃ～～♥
なぁ～お♥

三日月夜空の至福

遊佐葵
《ゆさ・あおい》

日高日向
《ひだか・ひなた》

体育祭、開幕

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私は盗作をしました

Words Lost in the Wind

"I mean, aren't we all friends already?"

A Fourteen-Year-Old Morning

It was now the day after Kobato's birthday party.

After saying goodbye to Maria and Kate Takayama, who had spent the night, I began making Kobato's and Maria's lunches along with breakfast as usual.

Kobato still wasn't up after I'd finished my breakfast slightly sooner than usual, so I had no choice but to go wake her up myself .

Last night, Kobato and Maria were up until just past midnight, making a racket playing each other in a video game (it was the new one I got Kobato for her birthday).

Kate had been busy sipping at her ginger ale and munching on dried squid while directing a lonely-looking gaze at the two of them. ...I wonder how can she act so much like an old man despite being a girl who's younger than me.

"Kobato~ It's time to get up~"

.....

I didn't get any response when I called out to her from downstairs, so I made my way up to her room.

"Kobato~"

Ca-lick—— I opened the door to her room and went in.

Her room is pretty sad, considering it's supposed to belong to a young girl.

There are posters of the "Kurogane no Necromancer" anime stuck up here and there, and stickers with the same magic square that shows up in it lying around too.

Aside from that, she's got an imitation of the cross that shows up in the anime, a skull key holder, phone straps with characters from the anime on them, and bunch of other stuff lying around here and there too.

And her newest addition, a bunch of charms with Sanskrit characters written on them, are stuck up around her room now too .

The charms are the same ones Yukimura gave her for her birthday yesterday after school.

I was honestly worried if she'd like them or not, but seeing as how she's treating them the same way she treats her beloved anime stuff, I guess she must like it quite a bit. ...I think I'll tell Yukimura about that.

Several textbooks and notebooks were lying in a messy pile on top of the children's study desk Kobato's been using since grade school as well.

There was a set of aroma candles and handkerchiefs carefully placed on one of the shelves on the desk.

These were gifts from yesterday as well. The handkerchiefs were from Yozora, and the aroma candles from Rika.

...By the way, the space she has the candles and handkerchiefs enshrined right now is where the signature of that one anime director she got thanks to Sena had been up until recently. However, that signature was now haphazardly shoved into a tiny space on her bookshelf.

And, as for Kobato herself,

"...Nn... Hafuu..."

She was enjoying a deep sleep on her bed with her arms and legs flung out in a T-shape.

Her negligee was flipped up, leaving her stomach and panties in plain view, and her blanket was currently lying on the ground.

Next to her pillow was the case containing the color contact she always puts on after getting up.

While feeling a sense of disappointment at her terrible sleeping posture that doesn't suit her cute, doll-like appearance in the least, I extended my hand in an effort to wake Kobato up.

As I did, I noticed that there was a cross-shaped necklace hanging down from her neck.

It was the same as the one Maria's always wearing, and is in fact Maria's birthday present to Kobato that she came all the way out here yesterday to give.

"...Nhyu..."

Kobato gently grabbed the cross while breaking out into a faint smile, still asleep.

I actually started wanting to smile myself, but we'd be late for school if she doesn't get up soon, so I shook her left shoulder.

"Hey~ Wake up~ It's almost time for school~"

However, she didn't wake up, no matter how many times I shook her.

...Only one choice left.

I brought my face next to Kobato's ears, and then said, in a serious tone of voice,

"Hey, Kobato! Kurogane no Necromancer is starting soon!"

"Funyah!?"

The second I finished my sentence, Kobato, who hadn't woken up no matter how much I nudged her, made a startled look on her face and threw her eyes open wide in an instant.

She darted her eyes around, examining her surroundings, and then an absentminded look rose to her face before she stopped and started staring at me with those blue eyes of hers that she got from our mom.

"......Kukuku... Fuahhh... An-chan..... Good night..."

Kobato yawned, and closed her eyes once more.

"Hey, hold it, don't go back to sleep! We're gonna be late!"

...It's her first morning after turning 14, but it looks like my little sister is still the same as ever.

Something He's Known For a Long, Long Time Now

"An unexpected important event came up and interrupted us, but starting today we can resume our discussion of what to do for the school festival."

It was after school, in the clubroom.

After entering the clubroom, my once best friend and Neighbors Club president, Yozora Mikadzuki, declared the above to us.

Sena, Yukimura, Rika, and I, the rest of the high schoolers in our club, were also in the room.

Yukimura was wearing her butler uniform standing behind me as I sat on the couch, and across from me were Sena and Rika (it looked like she was wearing her typical school uniform at first glance, but her skirt was actually rolled up 5 centimeters more than yesterday, she wasn't wearing her lab coat, the glasses she had on were frameless, and her hair was straight down and dyed ash blond) sitting together.

About a week ago, we all decided to do something for this year's school festival as "practice" for when we have friends in the future, but we put it on hold temporarily in order to hold a birthday party for Kobato.

"We've only got about a month left until the festival. We should probably hurry up."

Rika said while sending an unusual amount of glances my way as she ran her right hand through the hair on the back of her head.

By the way, the school festival is in the middle of November.

"You've got a point. We should at least figure out what we're doing."

I offered my agreement to what Rika had said, causing her to make a :3 shape with her mouth.

Yozora gave a big nod as well.

"OK, then let's brainsto——"

"Ah, wait, before we do that," I interrupted Yozora mid-sentence.

"...What do you want, Kodaka?"

Yozora looked upset about having me talk over her like that, so I made a sign with my hand to say "It'll only take a little bit," and continued,

"...I just wanted to say, well, thanks for yesterday you guys."

I could feel my face starting to turn red as I said that.

Yozora, Sena, and Rika all looked confused.

"I'm talking about Kobato's birthday party."

I got up off the sofa, and turned to face Yukimura, who was standing behind me, first.

"Kobato seemed to really like those... charms? you gave her. She stuck 'em up all over her room as soon as we got home."

"Is that so."

Yukimura's voice had an upbeat tone to it.

"The fact that your little sister enjoyed my gift is an unimaginable honor, Aniki."

Yukimura's cheeks blushed a bit as she made a tender smile.

Woah, she is ridiculously cute...

Seeing her make a face like that so close to me really gets my heart racing, considering the usual expressionless look she wears.

"Y-yeah. Y-you've got my thanks too."

I replied in a slightly high-pitched voice, and then turned to face Yozora and the other members again.

"Mu..." "Muu~"

I continued on and gave my thanks to Yozora and Rika as well, who both looked upset for some reason.

"She liked Yozora's and Rika's presents too. She carefully placed the aroma candles on her shelf, and it looks like she's already started using the handkerchiefs too."

"I-I see. ...Well, that's good to hear." "I-I see. That's nice to hear."

Yozora and Rika started blushing like they were embarrassed about something, and then both looked away from me at the same time.

As they did,

"W-what about mine!?"

Sena asked, her blue eyes sparkling as she hung all over the sofa full of excitement.

I was a bit taken aback by her enthusiasm, but managed to reply,

"Y-yeah. Of course she totally loved your gift too."

"Really!?"

"Y-yeah..."

"Uehe..."

Sena made a look of pure ecstasy.

"Ehehe... Kobato ate my meat and liked it... Ehehehe..."

"You should probably elaborate on that more, otherwise you sound like a freak..."

"Meat... You should think more carefully about what your words mean when you speak. I'm not even kidding, I mean it..."

Rika and Yozora both said in turn, reeling back at the sight of the disgusting grin Sena was making.

Unfortunately, it doesn't look like Sena's listening.

"Being eaten by the one you yearn for is indeed an unparalleled joy."

...I pretended not to hear that scary idea said in an absentminded voice behind me.

"W-well, anyway, thanks you guys, really. Of course, I'll make Kobato say thanks herself when she gets here too."

I then said, in an attempt to get things back on track,

"...Umm, uhh... How to put this... Having a birthday party with people other than your family is, like... pretty fun, isn't it..."

I truly felt that way from the bottom of my heart, especially when I remembered Kobato's blissful sleeping face from last night and this morning, even though it wasn't my own birthday party.

Kobato and I have been moving around for as long as I can remember, and we've never celebrated our birthdays with anyone but family.

In fact, Dad was busy working on our birthdays a lot too, so even birthdays with family were rare.

Being able to have a birthday party with a bunch of people—— Like we did yesterday with the Neighbors Club, Maria, and Kate, was a first for me.

Which is exactly why I wanted to give them my thanks before Kobato came. After all, this is a bit too embarrassing to say in front of my own little sister.

"Kobato was really happy yesterday... and, well, so was I... That was the first time I'd been at a birthday party like that... I was... I was really happy. So, umm, I mean it when I say this,"

Ah, crap, I'm kinda starting to tear-up here.

"Thank you."

I gave my thanks one last time, and made a light bow.

"Q-quit saying all that embarrassing stuff, Kodaka!"

Sena said, her cheeks beet red.

"D-don't call it embarrassing!"

"But it is! I mean, of course it's embarrassing for you to say it, but when you get all formal like that it makes it embarrassing for us too!"

"F-fine, maybe it is embarrassing, but I still wanted to say it! Especially to you, Sena. We only even did all this because you said you wanted to have a birthday party for Kobato, remember? Thanks for that."

"I-it's not like I did anything special! It's only natural for me to celebrate Kobato's birthday, since I'm her big sister and all..."

Sena can usually get right to point about anything, but strangely enough, that very same Sena was now blushing as she fumbled over her words.

"...By the way, I don't know how many times you want me to say this, but you aren't her big sister."

It's a pain, but I've gotta be sure to correct her every time she says that, because I'm afraid that otherwise it might end up being true somehow.

"Anyway, thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

I said thank you three times in rapid succession, feeling rebellious.

"Kodaka-senpai totally loves us!"

"It's not like saying thank you means I love you!"

I said in retort to Rika, who had her eyes wide open.

"Uu, ah... Well, um, I mean..."

Yozora turned her face away in embarrassment, and then went " Ahem." in an obvious attempt to hide that fact before turning to face me again.

"I must agree that the birthday party was quite fun. However, that means that all the normals out there in the world get to go to birthday parties who knows how many times a year! It's completely unforgivable!"

...That's hardcore Yozora. You managed to insult normals even in a conversation that had nothing to do with them. "A-and that's why――"

Yozora settled her breathing, thinned her eyes, lifted the corners of her mouth into an antagonistic smile, and then,

"We need to keep on striving to make friends we can have birthday parties with too!"

She made that optimistic declaration loud and clear.

"Yeah... Yeah, you're right...!"

I gave a strong nod in response.

"That showed us just how nice it is to have friends all over again ...! Let's give it our all, seriously."

"Heheh, I was planning on doing that all along."

A determined smile formed on Sena's face.

"It is as you say, Aniki."

Yukimura said from behind me in a monotone voice.

Rika jumped in too, and——... Rika?

"....."

Rika was staring at my face in complete silence.

The look she had didn't suit the optimistic atmosphere we'd just created in our renewal of our desire to make friends. She seemed to be fed up, melancholic—— *and mad*."

She had a look in her eyes that made it seem like there was something she wanted to say.

...I wonder why's she's acting like this. Is she upset that I ignored the big image change she made today? That wouldn't make sense though, I do that all the time.

...I swiftly averted my eyes from Rika's gaze.

As I did, Rika went "...Hahh," and let out a faint breath that could've been a sigh or her making a tiny smile.

"Aha! Then let's make sure we give it our all with the school festival, Senpai!"

She said with that cheerful, silly smile of hers.

"Y-yeah... Let's give it our all."

I felt something was off, but all I could do was nod in agreement with her.

...Back then, I was still "unprepared".

Because the truth is—— that I knew exactly what Rika had wanted to say.

The Third School Festival Discussion

A half hour or so later, Kobato entered the clubroom, seemingly a bit nervous.

She was in her usual goth loli clothes, and of course, the cross-shaped necklace was hanging down from her neck.

After telling her to say her thanks, her face went beet red, but she still managed to say, in a voice so quiet you could barely hear it, "T... Thank you... very much..." and then finished with a quick bow.

In response to her, Sena went nuts and started screaming stuff like "Kyafuooooooohhhhhhhhhh!! Kobato-chan is seriously an angelllll!! Kobato-chan, let me lick you! Come on, let me have a lick!!" and made a lunge at Kobato, but luckily Yozora silenced her with a whack from her flyswatter, allowing us to finally start talking about the school festival.

The six of us gathered around the table.

I was sitting with Yozora on my right, and Kobato on my left.

Across from me was Rika, who had Yukimura on her right-hand side, and Sena on her left.

Sena and Kobato were sitting so that they had the most possible distance between them.

"OK, so does anyone have any good ideas?"

Yozora asked all of us.

"Umm, the ideas so far have been a maid cafe, a fortune telling booth, and... actually now that I think about it, that's all we came up with."

We ended up deciding to have Kobato's birthday party while discussing the fortune telling booth, which leaves us where we are now.

"By the way, what's something people usually do for the school festival anyway?"

"A maid cafe!"

Sena gave an immediate reply to Rika's inquiry.

"We already did that!!" Yozora yelled at Sena.

"Well what do you want me to do about it? The protagonist's class almost always ends up doing a maid cafe during the school festival events in galge! There's also butler cafes, cosplay cafes, and animal cafes too!"

"I can more or less guess what a butler cafe and cosplay cafe would be like... but what's an animal cafe?"

I asked, to which Sena replied,

"A cafe where the waitresses dress up as animals!"

"How is that any different than a cosplay cafe!? I thought it'd involve actual animals or something."

"...Kodaka, think a little bit. It'd be unhygienic to have animals in a restaurant."

Yozora pointed out from the seat next to me.

"...Y-you've got a point..."

Rika then jumped into the conversation.

"But Yozora-senpai, according to what I've heard, there actually are some cafes full of dogs, or cats, or some other animal that you can play with while you have a drink. Apparently they're called cat cafes, dog cafes, or whatever."

"Ah, I've heard of those too. If I remember right, they just let animals roam around, and you can play with them all you want, right?"

"S-something as amazing as that exists...!?"

Apparently Yozora didn't know, as she looked completely shocked.

".....I see... So a paradise like that exists in this rotten world..."

Yozora started mumbling something with a meek expression on her face.

"Yozora?"

"!? I-it's nothing! I-in any case, we can carefully think over the cat cafe idea later."

"Carefully think it over, huh?"

"Shut up, be quiet Kodaka! A-anyway, doesn't anyone else have an idea?"

"I do."

The voice with an oddly enthusiastic tone came from none other than Yukimura.

"Yukimura?"

Yozora looked surprised too as she asked Yukimura to elaborate.

"I believe that a Sengoku Era generals cafe would be a splendid idea."

"A-A Sengoku Era generals cafe...!? Do those kinds of cafes exist too?"

Yozora asked, dumbfounded, to which Yukimura replied by tilting her neck, and asking,

"...They don't?"

"How would I know!?"

"They do~"

Again, Rika easily answered the question.

"As the name suggests, it's a cafe where the waiters dress up as the generals. I hear they address their customers as 'Milord.' "

"What...? Such an amazing thing exists...?"

Yukimura gave us a reaction much like the one Yozora showed us a few moments ago.

"By the way, there's also a 'princess cafe' which uses a similar concept. Aside from that, there's also little sister cafes, tsundere

cafes, BL cafes, cross-dressing boy cafes, nun cafes, reptile cafes, Gamudan cafes, Ova cafes, etc. I've heard that there are more kinds of cafes than one could ever imagine."

"Hahhh, how to put this... People have a wide variety of tastes, don't they..."

I sighed, half in shock, half in admiration, and then said,

"...If you ask me, they should spend more time on their food than their clothes, seeing as how they're all more or less restaurants."

"The food is important too, of course, but you can't even compete with your food unless you've got customers to serve. It's foolish and unrealistic to ignore the packaging and think that things will work out as long as what's inside is good. By the same token, your profits are going to be headed down and to the left if the only thing you've got going for you is the packaging."

"...We're talking about cafes here, right?"

I get the feeling we started drifting off into some other topic.

"If we're going to go with a specialty cafe, then how about a ' friend cafe?' That'd be pretty Neighbors Club-like."

Yozora came up with a fairly mysterious idea.

"A... friend cafe...?"

I asked, utterly unsure of what exactly a friend cafe would entail, prompting Yozora to begin her explanation, brimming with confidence.

"Yes. I just thought of it now, but it'd be a cafe where the employees interact with you like friends would. You'd be able to experience what it's like to have friends, even if you don't have any of your own."

"Oh...? Employees who act like your friend, huh..."

I tried imagining what it would be like.

Employee A: "Hey there Kodakacchi, what do you want to eat? What'll it be? Well? Well?"

Me: "Eh, uhh... umm, coffee..."

Employee B: "Coffee? Seriously~? Read the mood man!"

Employee A: "Haha, Kodakacchi you're hilarious man, I swear."

Me: "Eh, ah... haha..."

.....

".....You honestly think that'd work?"

"I've never heard of a friend cafe specifically, but basically it's a cafe where the employees act really friendly with you, right? Like

a shop where the waiters talk to you casually... I'm pretty sure those actually do exist."

"Honestly, going to a cafe like that would just get you irritated anyway, wouldn't it?"

Rika, Sena, and I all gave our own little remarks on Yozora's idea.

"Hmm... You're right, I suppose friends really are more special than that. They're not something you can just go and buy at some cheap cafe..."

Yozora nodded her head up and down, having been persuaded.

"Well, cafes aside, how about a haunted house?" Sena said.

"Oh, a haunted house, huh? That's a pretty common choice too."

"Meat actually came up with a good idea? I wouldn't be surprised if Earth exploded tomorrow..."

"Sena-senpai actually came up with a good idea? I bet aliens will come to invade Earth tomorrow..."

"Sena-anego proposed a sound idea? This must be a sign of the apocalypse..."

Yozora, Rika, and Yukimura all sounded like they were honestly afraid of what just happened.

"I always come up with good ideas! Listen up, haunted houses are a staple of any school festival! You and a girl go in all by yourselves, and then you walk down a scary path while holding hands! Then, a monster will pop out along the way and scare the girl so much that she ends up hugging me, which'll obviously make her like me a ton! Kobato-chan! Wanna go to a haunted house with me!?"

"No!"

Kobato gave an immediate refusal with a thoroughly disgusted look on her face to Sena's over-excited invitation.

"You're as disgusting as ever, Meat..."

Yozora said with a frown on her face.

"...Well, even if it is a typical choice, I doubt the Neighbors Club could do a haunted house anyway," I said.

"Why's that, Kodaka?"

"We've got nowhere to do it."

Lounge #4 is fairly big, but not enough to remodel it into a haunted house.

"The big classrooms and dojos are probably all reserved already too... And besides... We don't have enough people."

"Ah..."

Looks like Sena figured it out.

Even if you count our advisor, Maria, the Neighbors Club only has seven members.

"You need at least one person to stand at the entrance, right? A haunted house with only six people isn't close to enough."

Right as I finished my sentence, Yukimura opened her mouth, and said,

"Aniki, I believe that you alone would be able to produce the fear of over 100 ghosts simply by standing in the darkness."

"That's not the right kind of fear for a haunted house though, is it!? And hey, Yukimura, how could you say that about me like it's nothing!?"

"I am terribly sorry."

The corner's of Yukimura's mouth were raised into a faint smile as she gave me a quick bow.

...Wait, was Yukimura teasing me just now?

I felt a bit surprised by her rare behavior.

"Hmm, I could probably do something about the location though~" said Sena.

"Eh, really?"

I asked, after which Sena thinned her eyes and made an impish smirk.

"Hehe... Kodaka, do you know how political and financial power work?"

...The chairman's daughter is to be feared.

"I think we could make the monsters work too if we use some machines. Actually, I bet we could make them scarier than an actual person's bad acting," Rika casually added.

"...So it looks like a haunted house is doable then. OK, let's add it to the list of ideas for now."

Yozora said, and then wrote "Cafe", "Fortune Telling Booth", " Haunted House", on the whiteboard.

"OK, are there any other ideas?"

After discussing our ideas for a full hour, the suggestions written on the whiteboard were as follows:

Festival (shooting gallery, ring tossing, goldfish scooping, katanuki, etc.)

Quiz Competition

Play

Eating Competition (soba, manjuu, giant gyouza, ramen, meat)

Endurance Competition (heat endurance, cold endurance, abuse

Display

Band (problem point: can't play any instruments)

Dance

Flea Market

Doujinshi Shop (preferably 18+ BL doujins)

Club Magazine (good ways to make friends, etc. problem point: we wouldn't be here if we knew how to do that)

Planetarium

Comedy Show

Magic Show

We also came up with stuff like a giant maze, a cavalry battle in the water, etc., but they were all rejected because they'd be impossible to do with just the seven of us.

Someone also suggested a beauty pageant, but Yozora was vehemently opposed to the idea, so we dropped it.

"Hmm... I don't want to do a display here too."

Sena said with an unsatisfied look on her face.

That's right. Now that I think about it, apparently her class is doing a "History of Tohya City" display.

Last year Sena was unmatched in her display of patheticness, so all the girls in her class chose to do that, or so I'm led to believe.

"I suggested it because I figured it was something we'd be able to do, but I don't particularly want to do one either. It doesn't feel like something a normal would do," said Yozora.

"Well, sure, we might not have much to do on the day of, but isn't something we can all work on together a good idea?"

Sena made a disgusted look after hearing my thoughts on the matter.

"That's only if everyone gets really into it and pitches in. The one my class is doing is seriously a giant piece of crap."

She's got a point. A project chosen solely to stop Sena from doing whatever she wants isn't exactly going to have people brimming with motivation, is it...

"But doesn't that depend on what it's about? If it was something everyone could enjoy, then..."

"That's what I thought too, so I tried to get them to change it to ' The All-Knowing and All-Powerful Goddess Sena Kashiwazaki Display!' When I did though, all the girls were totally against my idea, just like before...! Ghhhh... Just remembering it pisses me off. Who do those stupid background characters think they are...!?"

"You're the stupid one here."

Yozora said, giving a considerably cold retort.

"Anyway, Meat's stupid antics aside, a display doesn't sound like it'll be much fun on the day of, so let's take it off the list."

None of the other club members seemed enthralled with the idea of a display either, seeing as how nobody said anything in response.

Hence, Yozora erased the word "Display" from the whiteboard.

She then said, while looking over the whiteboard,

"...Hmm... OK, let's try out the ideas here that we can set up easily, and for the bigger stuff like the flea market and planetarium , we can see if we like those ideas by checking out what a real one is like."

"Eh, we're going to try all of these?"

I asked, surprised, to which Yozora gave a swift nod.

"Of course. After all, we don't know what we'll actually end up doing for the school festival. The more practice we have the better, right?"

"Yeah, but isn't this a bit much? We've only got a month left, if we test all these out we won't have time to get anything ready in time for the festival. I think we should get rid of a few more choices..."

"Hrm... True, you might be right about that..."

After hearing what I had to say, Yozora spent a few moments in thought as she read over the list of ideas we had, and then went,

"Wup."

She erased "Comedy Show" from the list with no hesitation whatsoever along with a faint grunt.

"Wha- Why did you erase that one first!? That was the best idea up there!!"

I voiced my opposition to Yozora's outrageous decision.

By the way, I was the one who suggested we should do a " Comedy Show."

If I did a little stand-up in front of a big audience, and everyone realized what a funny guy I am, they'd stop thinking I was a delinquent, and I'd be able to make friends too! It was the perfect plan!!

"Yeah, it was the best one. The best one to erase."

"You made the right choice, Yozora-senpai."

"I believe your decision was correct, Anego."

"Kukuku... That was indeed the proper choice to make..."

For some reason, nobody else was opposed to Yozora's decision either.

"Kh, you're all so... This is why people with no sense of humor are... Hehe, but you know, you might be singing a different tune after you hear my latest joke, 'The Red Refrigerator Man'... Ahem. . ..I forget exactly when it was, but as I was walking down the street -"

"Kodaka, if you say another word I'm going to chop you up and throw you into a refrigerator."

.....

Faced with the cold stares of my fellow club members, I reluctantly stopped talking.

Yozora then started up our discussion again.

"Hm... Also... let's see... I guess we can cross off anything our classes are already doing."

"Well, we already erased display from the list," said Sena.

"Kodaka's and my class isn't doing anything in particular. Rika, Yukimura, what about your classes?"

"Who knows? I've never shown up for class even once," said Rika.

"My class will be forming a choir."

"A quire...?"

Are they going to do something special with 24 sheets of paper or something? That seems kinda weird to do for the school festiva ——... Ah, a choir. Got it.

"Well, that's definitely something we'd never do..."

That just leaves—— it was then that I realized something.

"Oh yeah, Kobato, is it OK for you to be here? What about the middle school division's festival?"

Kobato is currently enrolled in St. Chronica Academy's middle school division, which of course has its own festival, although it's held a week before the high school division's.

"Kukuku..... It's fine..."

Kobato answered with her typical chuckle.

"Are you doing anything for the middle school division's school festival, Kobato-chan?"

Sena appeared to be positively brimming with curiosity, but Kobato simply replied by going "Kukuku..." and looking away.

...That attitude of hers means she's gotta be doing "something" at the festival.

"Kobato, what's your class doing for the festival?"

"Kukuku... My clansman... that is not something you need to know..."

I didn't miss that drop of cold sweat that ran down her otherwise composed face.

Smells fishy...

In fact, after thinking about how it felt like I'd seen this before, I realized that the way Kobato is acting now is exactly the same way she acted when she told me "Kukuku... It's fine..." about her summer homework, despite the fact that she was nowhere close to finishing it.

...I should probably have her come clean now, to stop any problems from coming up later.

"I'm not gonna make you pork ramen anymore unless you tell me."

"Ku... Kukuku, a lower class demon is trying to threaten me, the Queen of the Exalted Darkness, Leysis vi Felicity Sumeragi...? How foolish..."

"There's some leftover meat from last night in the fridge, but I'm gonna eat it all."

"Kukuku..... N-no fair..."

"Then spit it out. What's your class doing?"

I pressed Kobato for an answer, and after groaning in frustration, she cast her eyes down at the floor in embarrassment, and said,

".....A-a movie..."

Her voice was so quiet that I could barely hear her.

"A movie!?"

We were all taken completely off guard.

But, come to think of it, all you need to make a movie is a camera after all. It's easy as long you aren't trying to make something like a Hollywood blockbuster.

"Ohh? That's actually pretty interesting."

"Hrm... A movie, huh..."

Rika and Yozora both seemed to be curious about the idea.

"OK, so you're doing a movie. What are you doing for it then?"

"Kukuku... That is a matter unrelated to you..."

Kobato's face twitched as she tried to dodge the question.

"You're not allowed to play any more games unless you tell me.
"

"Wha...!? B-but how am I going to prepare for the second holy war with that abominable pawn of God if you do that...!?"

"If you wanna prepare then tell me."

"Kh..."

Kobato made a frustrated grimace.

"...ole."

She mumbled something I couldn't hear.

"Eh? What'd you say?"

"...d role."

"Eh, role?"

Is she a part of the cast? I never would've guessed.

Kobato lifted her face, looked me straight in the eye, and yelled,

"What are ya', deaf!? I said lead role! I gotta play the stupid lead role!"

""The lead role!?""

Sena and I both yelled in unison. Yozora and Rika looked just as surprised as we were.

"The lead role... wait, you are? You got the lead role in your class' movie?"

I asked to confirm, and Kobato nodded with a pouty look on her face.

"Kukuku... Abominable apes... Why does a noble one such as I have to partake in the denizens of the day's vulgar recreation..."

"Getting the lead role is pretty awesome. Heck, it's super awesome!"

I said, ignoring Kobato's typical ramblings.

I'd been worried that Kobato was having trouble fitting into her class, but... is she actually really popular...?

Now that I think about it, even counting the time before we stopped constantly moving around and came here, not once have I ever seen Kobato getting teased or bullied.

"I want to see it! I totally want to see Kobato-chan's movie! I'm definitely going to see it!"

In response to Sena's excitement, Kobato said, "Uu~, An-chan, she's creepy..." with a face that looked like she was about to cry.

But, more importantly,

"So wait, Kobato! Is it OK for you to be spending time over here when you've got the lead role?"

"....."

Kobato stayed silent in the face of my question, but I noticed a cold sweat run down her cheek.

She totally ditched her class to come over here, didn't she...

I let out a huge sigh, and said,

"Kobato, you've got a chance to play a really important role. Go do it like you're supposed to."

I got even more serious after Kobato went "Muu~" with an upset look on her face.

"...You know, there are people in this world who don't get picked for *anything*, Kobato..."

"Nnn..."

Kobato made a faint moan, and then for some reason, looked at Yozora, Sena, and me, in that order.

Yozora made a face that said, "He's not talking about me~" and made a gesture towards Sena, who was wearing a stiff smile on her face.

"...OK? This is a big chance for you, so go give it your all. You've got people who need you, right? That's a really amazing thing. You can just come help us out when you've got free time, OK?"

I gently said, to which Kobato responded by staring at my face in silence for a short while before making a small nod and saying, "......OK."

I gave her a pat on the head for that.

"Now *that's* my Queen of the Exalted Darkness, Leysis vi Felicity Sumeragi!"

"A-an-cha-... Auu... K-kukuku... Yes, continue rubbing my head, oh loyal clansman of mine..... Afuahhh..."

Kobato's cheeks flushed as she finally stopped frowning and made a pleasant expression.

Movie

Kobato had just left the clubroom on her way back to the middle school division.

"OK, let's make a movie too."

I had pretty much guessed that Yozora would say that.

"I figured this is what we'd end up doing."

"Heheh, well, it only makes sense."

Apparently Rika and Sena did too.

"I agree, since we can put in almost anything we want if we do a movie. Like a comedy show."

"Yeah... Obviously it'll be like a play, but we could also put in a magic show, a band, a dance, and a whole bunch of other stuff too. We could probably use a festival, flea market, cafe, or anything else as the location too."

"Yep, sure could. We could put a comedy show in too."

"Tch..."

Yozora irritatedly clicked her tongue at my insistence on a comedy show.

Hey, I just think we should put some comedy in...

In any case, we decided on "making a movie" as our project for the festival.

Making such a spur-of-the-moment decision is definitely just like us.

"Aside from whether we put in any comedy or not, I think the most important part is the story, don't you all? Who's going to write the script?"

"You can leave that to me."

Yozora immediately answered Rika's question.

However, Sena quickly objected.

"Aaaaaabsolutely not! There's a 100% chance of the script being a total piece of crap if we let Yozora write it!"

"What did you just say Meat...? Are you mocking my amazing taste...?"

"How is *your* taste amazing!? I'll use my godly taste to write us a script, you just be quiet!"

I let out a sigh as they started glaring at each other, and said,

"Haa... Well, Yozora does have a previous offense. I guess it's up to me to write us a humor-filled sto-"

""Rejected!""

I was ruthlessly rejected by both of them at once.

"...Kodaka-senpai, what did you mean by past offense?"

Rika asked with her head tilted in confusion.

"Oh yeah, that's right, you weren't here for that, were you? Before you joined the club, we wrote a script for a play once. The heroine got rap... ran into a lot of trouble, and the whole story was a big mess in general."

"Now that you mention it, the short story relay was pretty out there too."

"You were part of the reason for that."

I made a quick remark to Rika, who was talking like she was completely innocent.

"...Hmph. Even I realize that script was a little bad; I won't do it again."

Yozora said with a slightly awkward look on her face.

"It was a lot more than a 'little' bad if you ask me. Honestly, it was total garbage."

"Silence, Meat."

"Fgyah!"

Yozora whacked Sena on the head with her flyswatter, and then declared,

"Anyway, I won't write something like last time, and I'll listen to all of your opinions too, so you can relax."

And so, Yozora ended up being in charge of writing the script.

In order to make sure that Yozora wouldn't do anything crazy, we all agreed to decide on the movie's genre, the characters, overall story, setting, and all the other parts of the movie's draft together.

Right away I suggested that any excessively stimulating depictions should be forbidden, seeing as how this is for the school festival.

"In other words, no rape scenes."

"What...!?"

Yozora looked absolutely shocked by my incredibly logical suggestion.

"Don't give me, 'What...!?' That's not something to be surprised about!"

"I knew you were going to try and do that..." said Sena with a scornful look in her eyes.

"This is ridiculous... Having Meat constantly suffering is the true pleasure behind any movie..."

"As if it is! If anything you're the one who should be constantly suffering."

Yozora then gave a cold reply to Sena's objection.

"Idiot. It's common knowledge that in monster and horror movies, the first person to get eaten by a monster or killed by the murderer is always the stupid-looking blond woman. You're a perfect fit for that role."

"Ahh, you're right, that definitely does happen a lot, doesn't it?"

Rika voiced her agreement.

"....."

I thought that, of the Neighbors Club members, Sena was the best fit for the role of the person who gets killed off first too, but I kept quiet about it.

"Gh... T-that doesn't mean that I have to play that role though!"

Sena groaned in frustration.

As she did, Rika quietly added,

"Ah, but the first side-characters who die are usually a couple, aren't they..."

"You've got a point. I might not look like it, but I actually like shark movies a fair bit, and I never get tired of watching a stupid couple of normals get eaten by the shark."

"You are seriously a terrible person! Also, what do you mean 'I might not look like it!?' You absolutely look like it!!"

"Hrm, OK, so the couple who'll get eaten by the shark will be——"

Yozora started to say something, but her expression turned into one of displeasure all of a sudden.

"Yozora...?"

"No, nevermind. We only need the stupid woman to die at the start of the movie."

"? What's with the sudden change?"

Yozora shook her head in an attempt to dodge the question.

"It's nothing. Anyway, let's start by thinking of a good way for Meat to die."

"I'm not gonna die! And since when did we decide on making this a monster movie!? We can't even do one with the few people we have here."

"Yeah, that's true."

I agreed with what Sena had pointed out.

"Even if we make the monsters using CG, it'd be hard to do with only us," said Rika.

"I don't really care so long as Meat dies horribly somehow..."

"Just how much do you hate me!?"

"If you really want to know I could give you a nice and thorough explanation. How about it?"

Yozora replied to Sena's teary-eyed protests with a completely serious face.

It was in this way that our discussion got off to its rocky start.

"Behold, I've come to the clubroom once again you pieces of poop! Ahhh! Onii-chan! Onii-chan's here! Ahahahaha! The vampire isn't here, but Onii-chan is! Ahahaha! Gyahhh! Yozora's here today too!"

...Things got even crazier on account of Maria bursting into the clubroom in the middle of our discussion.

Even so, we managed to put our ideas together and come up with an idea for a movie that had as much of what everyone wanted in it as we could fit.

The following is a list of the main aspects of the movie:

The movie will be a drama centered around "friendship".

The setting is a modern day high school.

One day, a new student will transfer in to the protagonist's class .

They don't like each other much at first, but they start to get along with each other after spending time together at school.

However, the transfer student's family has a dark secret——

The outline makes it sound plain, but there'll be singing scenes, dance scenes, it'll be entertaining, it'll have suspense, once in a while there'll be side-splitting gags, and we even have plans for battle scenes using magic and super powers to come into play at some point too.

The other, more minor parts of the movie, are as follows:

A samurai shows up (Yukimura's request)

A scene where two people become friends after fighting in a park dyed by the sunset (Yozora's request)

The role Sena plays is the most 'delicious' role of all (Sena's request)

We get to eat a lot of tasty food (Maria's request)

An ever so slightly risqué love scene between two boys (Rika's request)

The transfer student is initially misunderstood by his classmates , but eventually wins them over and becomes popular (my request)

We all agreed that everyone's request had to get put into the movie in one form or another.

"Hehe... This is shaping up to be pretty interesting. *Slurp*..."

"My ideas were especially good. I mean, this might end up turning out way, way better than your typical school festival independent film, don't you guys think?"

Rika and Sena both sounded satisfied as they voiced their opinions while looking at the whiteboard that had all of our ideas for the movie written on it.

"Yeah, it might," I said in agreement.

I was worried how things were going to turn out as we were discussing it, but I seriously felt that this movie was going to turn out great.

"Ahaha, I'm gonna be in a movie with Onii-chan! I won't have time to help the old hag out now either, so I think I'll just start

skipping out on it! I hope I get to play a role that kills an evil vampire!"

Maria seemed to be really looking forward to it.

"Aniki, I shall only serve you, even if it is within a movie."

"Sure thing, let's give it all we've got, Yukimura!"

"I shall."

Yukimura smiled tenderly.

"Hmph... I think I'll take this chance to make the masterpiece of the century. You can all wait in anticipation for the completion of our script."

"I guess I can look forward to it for you. You better not screw up any of my ideas!"

Sena condescendingly cheered the ever confident Yozora on.

Following that,

"Ah, just so you know, when I say 'delicious role' I mean 'a role that can wow everyone,' OK!? I don't want to be a piece of food, got it!?"

Yozora went "Tch," and clicked her tongue before saying,

"...But that means I can't make you 'The delicious Meat that gets eaten by Maria'... How can you just go around ruining my gags like that?"

"You really were gonna do that!? Can you not make people into tools for your stupid gags please!?"

"...I was just kidding. I'm going to write this script seriously."

So Yozora said, while showing us a smile overflowing with confidence.

...Thinking back on it rationally, there was no way we could make the masterpiece of the century with the ridiculous story we came up with, but sadly, we were all too fired up after our heated discussion to notice that fact.

Aoi Yusa

It was now the day after we at the Neighbors Club had decided that we'd be doing a movie for the school festival.

School had just ended, so I was currently on my way to the clubroom.

But, as I was, I happened upon a lone girl glaring up at the bulletin board hung up in the hallway.

I thought I'd seen her before, but upon closer inspection, it turned out I didn't know her after all.

The rankings for each student's performance on the finals we'd taken a short while ago were hung up on the bulletin board from highest to lowest.

My name was somewhere around the middle of it.

The top 10 students had their names in considerably big eye-catching letters, and it just so happens that I'm very well acquainted with the first name on that list—— that is to say, the person with the highest score in our grade.

Of course, that person is none other than Sena Kashiwazaki of class 2-3.

She had a terrifyingly good score of 895 out of 900 possible points. How the hell do you even get that good of a grade...

Incidentally, Yozora Mikadzuki's name was in 7th place, and her score was an equally impressive 837. She got the highest score out of all of class 2-5, the class we're both in.

Anyway, the girl's gaze was currently fixated on the name "Sena Kashiwazaki" that held the top spot.

Perhaps because of how short she was, it made her look like she was craning her neck to see all the way up there.

I decided to walk up to her since she'd caught my attention, and upon doing so I heard her going "Grrr...!" while flashing her canines.

The way she was acting made her look like some kind of baby wolf. I mean, it's not like I've ever seen a baby wolf before, but it felt like that expression suited her better than calling her a puppy.

I wonder, does she hate Sena for some reason...?

As I was pondering that question, the girl did an about-face all of a sudden, and our eyes met.

"W-what are you doing here!?"

The girl asked with a slight stutter as she glared at me menacingly with her eyes open wide.

Her hair was all spiky, and I'm not sure if she dyed it or if she's part foreigner or something, but it had a red tinge to it as well.

She had a tiny build and a somewhat childish face—— overall, she gave off a boyish impression.

"Ah, umm, I'm-"

Before I could even give her an answer,

"Ahh! I know you!"

The girl said in a loud voice with a startled look on her face.

Apparently she knows who I am, but that's not really something that surprises me anymore.

It wasn't my intention, but I'm actually rather famous in our school (mostly in a bad way).

She probably just thinks I'm a delinquent like everyone else... or so I thought, but,

"You're Sena Kashiwazaki's boyfriend!!"

"Bft!?"

I was so surprised by what she said I choked a little bit.

"B-b...!?"

The girl stared at me intently, and then said,

"Ghh...! I knew it, Sena Kashiwazaki is definitely my enemy...!"

"Umm... and just who are you again?"

I tried asking the girl who was grinding her teeth and whose fists were trembling.

"Y-you don't know who I am...!? Hahhh~ I guess this level of rudeness is to be expected from one of Sena Kashiwazaki's flunkies !"

Apparently I made her mad somehow.

"Eh... are you famous or something?"

The girl stretched out her back in an effort to make herself seem taller before declaring,

"I'm Aoi Yusa of class 2-3! I'm the Student Council Treasurer! I got second place in the finals rankings this time!"

"Oh...?"

At first I was surprised that she was in the same grade as me, but I managed to shake most of it off as I checked the bulletin board.

It's true, right there below Sena's name was "Aoi Yusa" in slightly smaller letters. Her score was 853.

I'd heard the name Yusa before, and I wasn't sure what kanji it used, but now I see. So that's how you write it.

By the way, Sena's also in class 2-3.

"So you're the second best in our grade and a part of the Student Council, huh? That's pretty awesome."

I'd meant that as honest praise, but Yusa just got angrier for some reason.

"Ghh...! That condescending attitude of yours is so irritating! I know I've always done worse than Sena both this year and the last, OK!?"

"Uh, I wouldn't know about last year anyway... But hey, I still think you're plenty impressive. Your opponent's just way too ridiculous is all..."

"I still want to beat her though, at least on our tests! She might be a beautiful super athlete rich girl with amazing grades, but I still want to beat her!"

That sounds a lot like a description I've heard before...

"I know; Sena Kashiwazaki is what you call a 'normal'! She's already so perfect, but she's even got a boyfriend too! Why is she so amazingly lucky!?"

"Hold on, wait a second here!"

I interrupted her in a panic to clear up the ridiculous misunderstanding she's making right now.

"I'm not going out with Sena or anything, OK!?"

"Heheh, it's useless to try and fool me. 'Sena' is it...? You obviously have some kind of special relationship with her if you call her that. All the boys in our class put "Mistress" in front of Sena Kashiwazaki's name."

This is hopeless, she's not listening to a word I'm saying.

Although, if all she ever sees is people putting Mistress in front of her name, I can see why she'd get the wrong idea about us.

Sena's definitely not a "normal" like Yusa thinks she is, but it's probably not my place to correct her either.

"Sheesh... I can't believe Sena Kashiwazaki went and got such a cool boyfriend while I was trying so hard to beat her... I'm so jealous!"

.....?

...Is it just me, or did she say something really weird just now?

"...Umm, by cool do you mean me?"

"Huh? Who else would I mean? You're obviously super cool."

She said, complimenting me with a face that looked like she'd just heard a really dumb question.

"You're clearly very fashionable, I can tell from that carefully dyed hair of yours. Also, the way you roll up one of your pants legs makes you stand out from all the other boring looking guys in this school. Oh, I know. Stylish cool guys like you are called 'bad boys,' right?"

My hair isn't dyed, and me rolling up my pants leg isn't a fashion statement, I just copied what the guys at my previous school all did. I'd hoped that dressing a little messy would make it easier to get along with everyone as opposed to looking all serious, but... anyway, that aside.

"...T-that's the first time anyone's ever said that to me..."

I was moved, because ever since I came to this school—— no, even at all the schools before this one, not once has anyone ever complimented my looks.

Yusa made a suspicious look on her face after seeing my response.

"What are you grinning for? You're not only cool, but funny too. This isn't just a little unfair, you're an amazing boyfriend to have, a

perfect match for that ridiculously perfect Sena Kashiwazaki. Argh , I'm so mad, and so jealous, and so envious! I'll be going now!"

After throwing several insults (compliments...?) at me, Yusa did a quick 180 and walked away.

Aoi Yusa, huh...

Looks like I just met yet another weirdo here.

I can feel a "weirdo aura" from her that's just like the one all the other people I talk to at this school have...

A Born Princess

After Aoi Yusa left, I left the bulletin board too, and went to the clubroom.

Yozora, Sena, Rika, Yukimura, and Maria were all there already by the time I arrived.

Sena was playing some handheld galge, Rika was panting while reading some robot doujinshi, Yukimura was spacing out, and Maria was getting ready for a battle with Kobato or something, because she was playing the "Kurogane no Necromancer" fighting game on the TV.

As for Yozora, she was busy writing something with a serious look on her face.

She would look frustrated every now and then and start pulling at her hair too.

"...What the heck are you doing?"

After hearing my question, Yozora turned to face me looking none too happy, and said,

"Can't you see? Obviously I'm writing the script for our movie. The greatest masterpiece of the century will be completed soon. Can you not get in my way?"

There was an empty energy drink bottle and a bag of glucose supplements on the desk she was working at.

There were also several balled up pieces of paper strewn about the floor as well.

It looks like she's trying to act like some kind of super serious writer.

"...You really like to look the part, don't you? Well whatever, good luck with the script."

I made my way away from Yozora, feeling slightly taken aback, and made my way over to the sofa in front of Sena.

We can't start making the movie until Yozora's script is done, so apparently everyone just decided to spend the time doing what they usually do.

"Hey, so, I ran into Yusa on the way here."

I started talking to Sena who was grinning while focusing intently on her game.

Sena then stopped playing her game, tilted her head in confusion, and simply said,

"Who's Yusa?"

Eh?

"Kodaka?"

I don't think she's faking it. It looks like she really doesn't know.

"Wait, what do you mean who? She's in your class, isn't she?"

"Eh?"

Sena's eyes went wide before she made an expression that looked like she was deep in thought.

"She's kinda short, and her hair's red too."

Sena seemed to remember her after hearing my brief description.

"Ahh, that's right, I'm pretty sure there was a girl like that in class... I'd have never figured it out with only her name."

"At least remember your classmates' names for crying out loud.. ."

"I-I know the name of the girl who sits behind me and the one who sits next to me! ...I wish I didn't though."

"...Did something happen?"

Sena then said, as though spitting the words out,

"Listen up, Kodaka. I told you this before, but there are only two kinds of girls in this world. There are the wonderful girls who get along with me, and the bitches who don't. Why should someone as great as me have to remember the names of a few stupid mongrels?"

She's calling her classmates mongrels now...

"...Apparently that Yusa girl's had her name right below yours in the test rankings ever since last year."

"Like I'd know what rank other people got. Where do they even put that stuff up anyway?"

"You don't even know!? They're right on the big bulletin board!"

Sena tilted her head in confusion after seeing how surprised I was.

"Hrm... Oh yeah, I think I remember now. I've never actually seen it though."

I was totally blown away by how casually she just said that.

"Are you serious...?"

"I mean, I can just find my rank on my report card, right? All that matters is that I'm number one."

"...How should I put this... You're just, amazing."

"You think so!?"

I complimented Sena along with a sigh, to which she responded by smiling happily.

"Actually, how the heck do you even study? Do you have a private tutor?"

If she's got some really good way to study I'd love to know, seeing as how I have a hard enough time just keeping up with my classes.

"The only times I study are when I'm in class or when I'm doing homework."

Sena said, seemingly mystified by my question.

"Seriously...? Then what about for finals?"

"The studying I did with you was all I did for the ones we just took. That was actually pretty fun."

...When she says studying with me, she must mean that time I got called over to her house.

We gave up studying almost immediately, and played games until dinner instead—— I don't know about her, but that's definitely not what I'd classify as "studying for our finals together".

"Anyway, Kodaka. What about that Yusa or whatever person?"

Sena asked while looking up at me from below, but I simply shook my head at her.

"It's OK, it doesn't matter anymore..."

All I could do was feel sad for the girl who treated Sena as her rival, despite the fact that Sena didn't even know her name.

Sena seriously doesn't pay any attention at all to the things she isn't interested in, does she...

On the other hand, she goes absolutely nuts over the stuff she is interested in, like galge and Kobato, to the point that she creeps everyone around her out.

There's also the fact that she's almost committing a crime when it comes to Yozora, despite not being interested in her... Wait, what am I saying, voyeurism *is* a crime... But yeah, that's the kind of stuff she'll do.

Does she even know what the word restraint means? She's always doing whatever the heck she feels like.

She's one of the few people in the world who can actually live so freely like she does. Her family's rich and she's amazing at everything she does—— in other words, she's a born princess.

There was that one time I saved her at the pool a while back, but thinking about it now, I get the feeling she could've taken out those guys hitting on her easily given how athletic she is.

I suppose it only makes sense for there to be other girls like Yozora and Yusa who act hostile towards her.

Hence, being able to spend time with someone as amazing as her so casually like this—— might actually be something to be proud of.

That fleeting thought crossed my mind.

Yozora still hadn't finished the script by the time we had to leave school, so we ended up not doing much in the way of club activities that day.

As we were leaving, Yozora said, still acting like a big shot writer, "So this is what birthing pains are like..." in a quiet voice with a serious expression on her face.

And it was Sena who happily started talking to that very same Yozora.

"Heheh, you know, I wouldn't mind lending you a hand if you bow before me and say you reaaaally need my help~"

"Asking some stray mutt to help me write would be better than asking you."

"Muu~"

Sena looked disappointed at Yozora's cold refusal as we left school for the day.

Is This a Date? No, It's a Bloodbath Flag.

The next day—— Friday.

Yozora still hadn't managed to finish the script by the time we had to leave.

"Phew... I guess this... is what you'd call a slump... But I want to believe that I can become an even greater writer by overcoming this challenge..."

Yozora seemed to be worried as she spoke in a solemn tone of voice, but come on Yozora. It's not like you're a real writer.

It would seem that Yozora's decided to play the role of the " writer suffering from writer's block".

"I couldn't care less about your slump or whatever, but don't forget, we don't have much time. If you make us wait any longer, I really am gonna write the script in your place."

Sena said with an accusatory look while playing her game.

"Mu... I-I know that."

Yozora said along with a slightly embarrassed look on her face.

That night, I got a text from Yozora.

Title: Tomorrow

Message: I'm going to see a movie so I can use it as a reference for the script, and I figured you could come too, if you're free. It's not like you do any talking during a movie, and I don't think that there's any reason why you'd need to have someone with you to see a movie either, but I just thought that it might not be a bad idea to go together if there was some movie you happened to want to see or something. It's not like it matters if you don't want to see one, I'd be fine going by myself too, so don't worry about it if that's the case.

...Her texts are as roundabout as ever, but I guess the main point is she's inviting me to see a movie with her.

It's true that if we're gonna make a movie, it might not be a bad idea to go learn from a real one.

Alright, then I'll ask everyone else if they want to come too——

Is what I thought, but I quickly received another text from Yozora.

I could tell she typed it up in a hurry, because there were a few little typos here and there.

Title: Untitled

Theres no pint in going witha bunch of poeple though, so don't bothet teling the other clib membefs about this

Translation: There's no point in going with a bunch of people though, so don't bother telling the other club members about this.

And so, it was decided that Yozora and I would go see a movie together tomorrow.

It was now the next day at 1:30 in the afternoon.

After arriving at Tohya station, the place we'd agreed to meet up at, I quickly found Yozora already waiting.

She had her usual sullen look on her face, her arms were crossed as she leaned up against the wall, and...

.....She was wearing a **sweatsuit**.

I had a feeling she might do something like this, but this is just...

Even sweatsuits can look reasonably fashionable, but the one Yozora had on was the exact same plain, boring black sweatsuit she bought to change into back when we went shopping in Nagayashi.

I'm pretty sure that even the school tracksuits would look better than what she's wearing.

In fact, there actually were some girls walking around in sweatsuits like Yozora, probably for some sport or something, but Yozora's all-black sweatsuit still stood out like a sore thumb compared to them.

"...You seriously plan on going out in that?"

I asked, half in shock at her apparel, but Yozora simply nodded without changing expressions at all.

"Of course."

"Anyway, let's go, Kodaka."

"Hahhh.."

I followed after Yozora while sighing as she walked away at a brisk pace.

About 15 minutes after we got on the bus in front of the train station, we arrived at the street the movie theater was on.

There were clothes stores, toy stores, used book stores, restaurants, and several other buildings lined up along the road, but somehow they all looked a bit shabby.

Most of them weren't brand-name stores, but rather small, self-owned places, and every building we saw looked considerably old.

There were several shops with their shutters down as well, and there certainly weren't many people walking around.

I usually pass by this area on the bus to school, but I've never actually walked through here. I didn't even know that there was a movie theater way out here.

As for Yozora, she seemed to be a bit more lively than usual as she walked beside me.

"Do you come here often?" I asked.

"Occasionally. ...I like it because not many people come."

Looks like I was right, she really is in a strangely better mood than usual.

Still, she really hates dealing with crowds, doesn't she...

It's obvious how much more she likes desolate places like this compared to the hustle and bustle over by the train station.

I suppose you could say she's just more of a quiet person, sort of .

"So, what movie are we gonna go see?"

"I didn't really pick anything out. We can just find something that looks good when we get there."

"You sure that's OK?"

"This is how I always decide what to see."

...That sounds a lot different than how a normal high school girl would go see a movie.

Rather than go out to see the latest movie with commercials all over the place, Yozora's got this connoisseur-like feel to her.

"So wait, Yozora, do you go out to see movies a lot?"

"...Well, I suppose I see my fair share."

Yozora replied in a slightly tinier voice than usual, seemingly embarrassed about it.

About five minutes later, we arrived at our destination, the movie theater.

It was an old mini-theater, and didn't look like it was a popular place to go in the least.

However, lucky for us, according to the sign out front, a movie was about to start in a few minutes.

It was some French movie I'd never heard of before, and the poster for it had a man and a woman in their 30's facing each other in a forest in what appeared to be the middle of fall. It looked incredibly simple, or perhaps "plain" would be a better way to put it.

They're probably the lead roles in the movie, but I can't recognize either one of them.

...Honestly, I'm really doubting I'll like this movie.

I generally only watch movies if they get broadcast on TV, but most of the movies I like are Studio Jibli anime, and those big flashy "Number One in America!"-type movies with tons of CG and stuff.

It's even better if it gives me a sort of refreshing feeling after watching it too.

"Hrm... Well, the timing *is* pretty much perfect, so I guess we can go with this one."

"......Ehhhh..."

I made a sour look on my face after hearing what Yozora had to say.

"...You don't want to?"

"Ah... Well, it's like..."

Yozora offered up some other ideas while I was fumbling over my words.

"Should we go somewhere else then? There's two other theaters nearby."

However, I shook my head.

"No, this one's fine."

I don't think it's such a bad idea to try out a kind of movie I normally wouldn't watch every now and then.

Who knows, it might be really interesting.

We both bought our tickets while I was thinking about that.

The inside of the theater was, unsurprisingly, completely empty , and we could sit wherever we wanted, so we decided on a pair of seats right in the middle.

We didn't buy drinks or anything else besides our tickets.

As for why that is, it's because Yozora said she can't drink pop because she can't handle the carbonation, she doesn't like orange juice, she doesn't like the taste of Oolong tea, and she doesn't like the way popcorn smells or the way it dries out your throat.

...Honestly speaking, I don't think she's really suited for going to a movie theater.

I figured I'd buy something to snack on myself, but stopped once I saw how high the prices were. Besides, I don't particularly like junk food much either. I couldn't bring myself to buy some food I don't even really like, especially considering that I'm in charge of the money at home.

...I might not be all that suited for going to movie theaters either .

Anyway, a bunch of ads for new movies that were supposed to come out soon started playing, and just as I started thinking "Man this is long..... when's the movie gonna start?" the movie did in fact finally start.

I came here without any knowledge on the movies this theater had, so I had absolutely no clue what this one was going to be about either, but apparently it's a love story.

The protagonist and the heroine were both in their 30's, and they were married with children too, which is great and all, but it makes it hard for a high school boy like me to get into it. On top of that, it wasn't a drama with the husband cheating on his wife or anything either. It was just a movie about their daily lives and interactions with each other.

It was so plain that I couldn't tell what the characters were feeling, or what motivations they had either.

I don't want to see any crazy stuff happening around me in real life, but when it comes to fiction, I like it to be more thrilling and easy to understand.

I should've said we should go see a different movie after all...

Reading the subtitles started to be a pain, so I took a look over at Yozora while regretting my choice, and upon doing so I saw her glaring up at the screen with a hostile look in her eyes for some reason.

I wonder, does she not really like the movie either?

Or wait, does she hate "normals" even when they're just fiction? I don't think there's a lot of movies she can enjoy then, if that's the case.

Personally, I don't like or hate the movie, it's just boring really, that's probably the best way to put it.

How much longer until it's over... I'm getting really sleepy here. ..

Or so I thought, but then *that* started.

As for what *that* was, it was none other than—— **a sex scene**.

Ugfhugh...!?

I wasn't paying much attention, so I'm not exactly sure how this kind of scene came about (I get the feeling I wouldn't know even if I had been paying attention), but anyway, apparently the protagonist's and the heroine's feelings reached their peak, because

they were now in the middle of a French kiss right in the middle of the road (conveniently, there were no cars going by).

The scene then changed to some bedroom, where the sex scene really got started.

The movie was a normal one, not an AV or some kind of porn game, so it didn't have any explicit shots of what was going on, but that didn't change the fact that there was a man and a woman having sex right in the middle of the screen.

It would've been better if I was alone, but watching something like this with a girl my age right next to me is incredibly awkward.

I took a glance over at Yozora as I felt a cold sweat run down the side of my face.

Yozora's face was so red it was plainly visible, even in the dimly lit theater, and while she did have her face pointed down at the ground, she was still looking up at the screen.

Then, all of a sudden, Yozora took a glance over in my direction .

Our eyes met.

"……!"

"~~~~~///!"

We both hurriedly looked away from each other, and faced forward.

On the screen was the heroine, whose boobs were shaking as she screamed "Oohh! Yessss! C'est si bo~n! C'est si bo~n!" in French while gasping.

The movie ended, and Yozora and I left the theater.

...The protagonist and the heroine C'est si bon'd four times before the movie was over...

"U-umm..... S-so, did that help with the script?"

"Like hell it did, idiot!!"

Yozora quickly and angrily replied to my question I'd asked to try and get rid of this awkward atmosphere.

"The protagonist and the heroine were terrible, the plot outline was obviously terrible, the execution of the story was terrible too, and..... I-it had those dirty scenes too."

Yozora's face went red again before she continued on, and said,

"...A-although, I suppose you might be able to say it helped. W-we're high schoolers, so I think that rather than a lewd and shameless movie like that, we should make a healthier, more cheerful story fit for high schoolers like us!"

"Y-yeah, that's right! I think so too!"

I was in strong agreement with her about that.

Then, all of a sudden,

"B-by the way Kodaka, do you, um... t-think you want to c-c'est si bon, too?"

Yozora had her face down, but was looking up at me as she mumbled something in a tiny voice.

"Eh? What'd you say?"

"I-i-i-i-it's nothing! OK, I'm gonna make a healthy script!"

Yozora renewed her determination in what seemed to be an attempt to change the subject, so I decided to give her a, "Yep, good luck with it," as encouragement.

A short while after that, Yozora said, "Let's go get something to drink while we're out here," so we got on the bus, and got off at the nearby shopping district.

I thought it was weird that she wanted to go to a cafe in the shopping district where it's crowded instead of one by the movie theater, and when I asked her about it, she said, "There's a shop I want to go see no matter what," as her answer.

We spent about 15 minutes walking to the cafe, guided by the directions Yozora put on her phone in advance, before finally arriving at our destination.

It wasn't that far of a walk, but due to the fact that Yozora walks at half-speed in crowded areas, it took quite a while.

"*This* is the shop you wanted to 'go see no matter what'?"

I looked over at the sign out front, and on it was written:

Kitty Cafe - Kittens Everywhere

In other words... this is a cat cafe, the kind we talked about a few days ago while we were deciding what to do for the festival (and that is one... interesting name this place has).

I stared at the side of Yozora's face, causing a cold sweat to roll down her cheek.

"W-what!? Got a problem with it!?"

"No, not really..."

"T-this is just for research purposes!"

Yozora opened the door while trying to smooth things over like some kind of tsundere, when all of a sudden,

"Hya!?"

She let out a cute yelp like that one.

"A cat!?"

I let out a little yelp of my own upon following Yozora inside.

"A kitty~♥"

Is it just my imagination, or did an incredibly sweet sounding voice just come out of Yozora's mouth? It's gotta be my imagination, right?

Anyway, that aside, two cats had already walked up to us right at the entrance to the cafe.

There was a little gate by our feet to stop the cats from running outside, but it was small enough that a cat could still get over it, so I quickly closed the door.

We took off our shoes and put on some slippers, and then walked over to the reception desk.

We could see the spacious interior of the cafe from where we were, and the furnishings weren't much different from that of a normal cafe, but there were tons of books about cats on a magazine rack, and all the framed pictures on the walls were of cats too.

Of course, there were ten or so cats walking around inside as well.

Wow... There really are cats inside the cafe...

There were about 10 other customers, and they were all relaxing by eating cake, petting the cats, or teasing them with a green foxtail toy.

"Ohh..... Hafuu~..."

"...Hey~ Earth to Yozora~"

"......♥"

Yozora looked like she could barely contain herself, and was completely obsessed with the cats roaming around the cafe, so I listened to the clerk's explanation of how the cafe works for the both of us.

The clerk said it costs 600 yen for one hour plus a drink, and that anything else we order costs extra.

Apparently we can rent out some toys, like a rat doll or a green foxtail, to play with the cats, too.

Incidentally, you can rent out cat ears and cat tails to wear for some reason as well. ...I guess they're so the cats act friendlier towards you?

When the clerk asked how long we'd like to stay, Yozora said, " We'll start with six hours for now!" which was completely ridiculous, so I hurriedly corrected her. In the end, we both paid for one hour before entering into the main part of the cafe.

Upon sitting down on the low couch we'd been guided too, a few cats came up to us.

"Ohh, well aren't you a friendly little guy..."

My face softened up reflexively after a black cat snuggled up to my feet.

H-how can you be so cute, you little cat you...

As for Yozora, she'd quickly begun playing with two cats using the green foxtail toy she rented.

The expression on her face was unimaginably sweeter than the usual sour look she wears, and she'd occasionally let out an "Auu... " in a happy voice after failing to hold back a smile.

Yozora ignored the coffee she'd ordered when it arrived in favor of playing with the cats, so I told her,

"Why don't you try going 'Meow~' and stuff to talk to them? They might understand you."

I'd only intended it as a joke, but as I began sipping away at my lemon ice tea,

"Ohh, that's a great idea! Meow~♥ Meowww~~♥ Me-yoww~♥ "

I heard Yozora Mikadzuki, the intelligent and beautiful, yet friendless girl who always wears a sullen look on her face, is completely anti-social, is avoided by her classmates, and is unparalleled in her ability to insult normals,

talk like a cat.

にゃ～♥
うにゃ～～♥
なぁ～お♥

A few seconds after allowing that shocking realization to sink in

,

"Habft!? Bfgh, bhgft!"

Yozora finally returned to her normal self after noticing me choking spectacularly on my tea that went down my windpipe on account of how surprised I was.

"W-what the heck are you making me say here!? Kodaka, you idiot!"

Yozora angrily yelled, her face a deep shade of red, scaring the cats away from her.

Yozora made a sad face that looked like this: (´・ `)

"......You really like cats, don't you?"

I was pretty sure she liked cats ever since we first talked about the cat cafe thing with the Neighbors Club, but honestly, I never imagined she liked them *this* much.

"I-it's not like I like them *that* mu——"

She started to say, but stopped, and instead said, in a defiant tone of voice,

"...S-so what!? There's not a single person on this planet who hates cats!"

Looks like she loves cats so much she can't even lie and say she doesn't.

She then made an absentminded look on her face, and said,

"...Geez, how can something so cute exist in this world... If that Ainuu companion dog in 'MonHun' was a cat instead... If it had a name like, 'Airou,' or something, I'd probably be a pro-level hunter by now..."

"What the heck is a pro-level hunter?"

By the way, just so you know, in the PSP game "Monster Hunters", you can go out hunting with a dog-like companion called Ainuu who walks on two legs.

...I think dogs are just as cute as cats though, if you ask me.

"You don't have a cat at your place or anything?"

"No, because I live in an apartment. No cats allowed."

Yozora replied with a frown on her face, which made perfect sense to me.

"Oh yeah, *I remember you told me that before*."

"Yeah..."

Yozora's expression clouded over all of a sudden.

"...Although, I doubt I'd raise one even if I didn't live in an apartment."

"Eh, how come?"

I asked, thinking it was strange, to which Yozora replied, along with a lonely smile,

"...Do you remember Night, Kodaka?"

...I made a small gasp after hearing that name.

"...Yeah, I do."

Remembering Night caused my mood to cloud over too.

"Night" is a name from 10 years ago. He was both Yozora's—— Sora's—— and my friend.

...Well, I say friend, but he was a cat.

He was a stray cat that was living in a worn down old temple near the park Yozora and I used to play at, and he liked it when we'd give him food, so he quickly became attached to us.

He wasn't a kitten or anything, but he was small, and had little patches of white fur mixed in with the rest of his black fur that looked like a starry night sky, so we named him "Night".

We couldn't raise him at my place because of Kobato's allergies, and Yozora lived in an apartment where pets were banned, so we took care of him by sneaking food out from our houses to give to him instead.

But, about a month after we'd started taking care of him, Night disappeared all of a sudden one day.

We both ran all around town searching high and low for Night, but we never did find him.

I have no idea what ever truly became of Night.

He was small, but fairly old; maybe he went to be alone because he knew his time was near.

Or maybe he was picked up by a kind person passing by.

Or maybe...—— No, I cried enough when I thought about that other terrible possibility back then. There's no need to dig it up again now, after all this time.

"...It's sad, losing someone like that all of a sudden."

.....

I could say nothing to Yozora as she whispered with a distant look in her eyes, because I was the one who left her without any warning all those years ago.

"If it's going to make me sad, then I'd rather just play around, and not get involved too much. I don't need any deep bonds..... Ah, I'm only talking about cats here though, OK?"

Yozora added that last part with a somewhat hurried attitude.

"...Well, anyway, I like cats. You might as well remember that, Kodaka. ...Also, the reason I used the NyarugaKuruga armor in MonHun was actually because I like cats."

"I don't really remember what you were wearing back then anyway, but OK..."

By the way, I'm pretty sure that NyarugaKuruga was a giant cat-looking monster.

In MonHun, you can take the furs and horns and such from the monsters you defeat and make gear out of them.

"It was pretty hard to get the rarer ingredients to make that armor. Thinking about how I had to hunt the NyarugaKuruga 44 times straight really takes me back..."

Yozora said, with that distant look in her eyes again.

"......You know, that kinda just killed the mood here."

Of course, my little comment was gracefully ignored, as always.

We played with the cats until our hour was up, and then left the cafe, heading for the train station.

Time sure does fly; it's already the end of October.

It gets dark out pretty early now too, which explains why the sky is already dyed a nice shade of orange at this time of day.

"See you on Monday at school, Kodaka. Look forward to my script too."

Yozora said with a smile as we went our separate ways at the ticket gate.

Yozora's been in a good mood ever since we left that cat cafe.

"H-how to put this, today was, like, you know."

"Huh?"

Yozora took a deep breath—— and then said,

"...It was like it was 10 years ago."

A beautiful, mature smile—— much unlike the one she had 10 years ago—— rose to Yozora's face as she finished her sentence.

That smile sent my heart pounding.

That might've been really bad if she was in a skirt or hot pants instead of that sweat suit...

A smile formed on my face as well as I entertained such thoughts.

"...Yeah, you're right, it did *feel* like it did back then, *sort of*."

Yozora went "Yeah..." and nodded her head in response to my reply while fiddling with her bangs as though she were embarrassed.

"S-see you later then, Kodaka."

Yozora said before doing an about face, and walking away with a bit of a spring in her step.

I watched her walk off for a bit, and then began to make my way home as well.

Childhood Friend

"I finished the script," Yozora declared as she came into the clubroom.

It was now two days after Yozora and I went to the movies and that cat cafe together.

Sena, Yukimura, Rika, Maria, and I were all in the clubroom, and each one of us looked relieved in one way or another.

"I thank you for all of your toils, Anego."

Yukimura gave a polite bow in her butler uniform.

"Ahaha, it's finally done~!" Maria yelled energetically.

"I was worried about it for a while, but it looks like we can start shooting the movie now," Rika said.

Incidentally, today Ms. Rika Shiguma has her hair dyed blond and tied up into twintails, along with red and blue color contacts in her eyes and a goth loli outfit.

...Looks like she's copying Kobato, probably because Kobato's busy with the middle school division's festival preparations and can't be here.

I thought Sena would love it, since she's lonely without Kobato and Rika's outfit is like Kobato's in that it looks like something a character in a video game would wear, but contrary to my

expectations all it managed to do was piss her off and cause her to yell,

"You god damn imposter !!"

I guess Sena actually likes Kobato herself and not just how she looks then, huh...

I doubt Rika was trying to have Sena jump all over her like she does to Kobato, but she still seemed a bit hurt after getting yelled at like that.

...Well, it does make sense though. Even I think Rika's outfit today is pretty out there.

Anyway, leaving Rika aside, Sena started talking to Yozora with a condescending look in her eyes.

"Heheh, I suppose I'll praise you for a job well done, be thankful for that! Still, what matters is the script itself. You made me, Sena Kashiwazaki wait for days on end. If this is some piece of crap like Momotarou or that yankee samurai story, then I'm gonna be really pifgyah!?"

Yozora whacked Sena on the head with her flyswatter.

"Where do you get off talking like that to *me*? You damn chunk of meat. ...I don't need your thanks, in fact I'd gladly pay an industrial waste service to come and get rid of you, but you can relax. I'm honestly... proud of this script."

Yozora's voice was filled with confidence.

Looks like she's really pretty confident in her script. This movie just might turn out really awesome.

"A-anyway, let's read it over."

I said, prompting Yozora to take out a giant bundle of papers from her bag.

"Here's the script of the century, read it with care."

Apparently she prepared enough scripts for each of us, because she began going around handing each of us a stack of paper.

While I did think it was pretty iffy for her to call her own script the "script of the century," I, along with everyone else, began reading Yozora's script.

A few minutes later...

".....This isn't half bad."

Words of praise fell from Sena's mouth, likely unconsciously, after she'd finished reading.

An expression of both honest surprise and astonishment rose to her face as well.

"Yozora-senpai... wrote this...?"

"Yozora-anego is hardcore."

"This is friggin' awesome...!"

Following after Sena, Rika, Yukimura, and I all finished reading too, and each of us had our own words of shock and praise as well.

"Hrmm, I don't really get it~"

...It would appear that our little 10-year-old Maria is still too young for this kind of thing.

That aside though, Yozora's script was honestly amazing.

No wonder she said she was proud of this.

If I had to give it a length, it'd be about the same as a 60 page long light novel from MF Bunko.

In the story, the protagonist is isolated in his class, but one day he reunites with his old best friend who transfers into his class, and they face many trials and tribulations together.

The setting is in a school, and the "Various trials and tribulations" feel like things all of us might have experienced, or even things that I myself have experienced in the past. They all feel very realistic, and I can understand how the characters feel to an almost painful extent.

However, it's that deep bond of friendship between them that allows them to overcome all those difficulties that's truly moving.

The story overall is sort of dark, but there are comedy scenes as well, and in the end it's not just the protagonist and his best friend, but all the people around them too—— including some of the people who tormented them before—— who come together and create an astounding and beautiful happy end to the story.

I'd say the overall plot is on the plain side, with most of what we asked for (fights with superpowers, samurai, etc.) left out. In fact, the whole thing is a pretty big change from what we decided on together. There's no dancing or singing, and honestly it's practically an entirely different story, but none of that matters.

The most important thing is that it's a "youth drama about friendship". As long as we have that, we can make a movie befitting the Neighbors Club.

"...This is good. This is seriously good! Are you a genius!?"

"Y-you think so?"

Yozora started acting embarrassed after I got excited and blurted out how good I thought it was right to her face, but she quickly wiped the smile off her face.

"Hmph, of course it's good!"

She declared lacking any hint of modesty with her arms crossed in front of her.

"Alright, so everyone's OK with using this script?"

Rika asked, to which everyone obviously nodded.

"Then that means we need to decide who gets what role."

"Yeah, you're right," I said.

The main characters in this movie are: Kuuya, the protagonist, and Kuuya's old best friend who transfers into Kuuya's class, Hirotaka.

Another character is Sana, a central figure in the protagonist's class who continues to be hostile towards both Kuuya and Hirotaka until the very end.

There's also Serika, who falls in love with the protagonist, Hirotaka, after he treats her kindly, and constantly harasses Kuuya , who's always with Hirotaka, as a result.

In addition, there's a boy named Nobuyuki in Hirotaka's class who secretly admires him.

Kuuya also has a little sister who he doesn't get along with named Mari,

Aside from that, there's a few other characters, but those six are the main ones.

"OK, so let's figure out which roles we'll all pla——"

"You don't have to bother, I already decided on the cast."

Yozora said, cutting me off mid-sentence.

"You decided...?"

We all made dubious looks on our faces.

"Relax, I wrote the script with the cast in mind."

"Who said you get to..." said Sena with an upset look on her face .

"...Well, let's at least hear what you came up with," said Rika, urging Yozora on, to which Yozora nodded before casually listing off the cast she created on her own.

"First off, I'll be playing the protagonist, Kuuya. Kodaka will be Hirotaka. Meat will play Sana. Rika will be Serika, and Yukimura will play the role of Nobuyuki. Maria will be Mari. Well, what do you think? Perfect, right?"

""Objection!!""

Sena and Rika both yelled in unison, and even Yukimura seemed a bit upset as she pursed her lips.

"...What, is there a problem?"

Yozora asked in a cold tone of voice, to which Sena furiously replied,

"Why do you get the lead role!? And why am I the villain!?"

"It's not like it's a bad choice. I came to the conclusion that I should play the lead role after carefully considering both the script I wrote, as well as who in the Neighbors Club would be most fitting for the role. The reason I picked you, Meat, to be Sana, is because your appearance and background are the closest to hers. Sana is a very flashy person, and the center of her class. I hate to admit it, but you share a lot of points with her. Also, it's better to call her a 'rival' or 'enemy' rather than 'the villain.' She's certainly got her fair share of problems, but Sana is a good person at heart. She's in almost as many scenes as the protagonist too, that makes her a 'delicious' role, doesn't it?"

"Now that you mention it, you... might be... right..."

Sena still seemed to be a little unsatisfied, but was otherwise convinced by Yozora's argument.

"The rest of the casting decisions I made have similar reasons. Nobody has any complaints, right? OK, then we're all s——"

"Please wait a moment."

Rika opened her mouth and interrupted Yozora, who was trying to move the discussion along as quickly as possible.

"...W-what is it?"

I think I just saw Yozora twitch there.

"I don't think there's any problem with having people play characters whose characteristics are similar to their own. It might be true that by that reasoning, you would be a fitting choice for the role of Kuuya, Yozora-senpai. There's plenty I could say about how you're the one who thought up the characters in the first place , but it's true you looked really good in that gakuran the other day, and personally Rika loves the way you look in guy's clothes, Yozora-senpai. I think that Sena is a perfect fit for the role of Sana as well. Rika's, Yukimura's and Maria's roles aren't as perfect, but I think that they fit too."

"That was my intent. So there's no problem th——"

"But I do think that Kodaka-senpai should play a different role."

"......!"

Yozora knit her eyebrows.

"Eh, I should!?"

Rika's sudden complaint with my role left me a bit surprised.

As Yozora mentioned before, I'm supposed to play the role of the protagonist's old best friend, Hirotaka.

As for what Hirotaka is like,

"——Hirotaka Nakagawa, male, age 17. The boy who transfers into the protagonist's class. Doesn't forgive people who do bad things, and has a strong sense of justice. He's honest and straightforward, and isn't afraid to tell others exactly how he feels about something. He's also popular, sociable, has a sense of humor , and knows how to read the mood, but would never let himself get caught up in it and look down on his friends. He is skilled in both academics and athletics, has an attractive figure, a dignified face, and——..."

Rika went on reading Hirotaka's character profile out loud in great depth.

Hirotaka... he sounds like a great guy.

He's definitely the perfect role——

"There's no way this role fits Kodaka-senpai no

matter how you look at it!!"

——for me?

Rika shouted in an ear-piercing voice all of a sudden.

"W-what...!?" I was shocked.

"Kh...!"

However Yozora let out a frustrated groan that made it seem like she knew exactly what Rika meant. ...What kind of reaction is that?

"...Yeah, Kodaka has practically nothing in common with Hirotaka. I'd be much better suited to playing a superhuman like him."

"Don't be stupid, Meat. As if we could have some cow-woman whose boobs steal all the nutrients meant for her brain play one of the lead roles. The whole movie will turn into one big farce the second a milk cow wearing a boy's uniform shows up on screen, got it?" Yozora shot her usual insults at Sena, but even that was ineffective against Rika.

"If we're choosing by appearances, then doesn't that make Kodaka even less suited?"

"...!"

"Yeah! Kodaka should be... hmmm... none of the main roles really fit him, but don't you think he'd be perfect for playing a yankee named, like, Masao, or something, who's one of the insanely beautiful Mistress Sana's loyal dogs who always bullies Kuuya?"

"Ah, I see what you mean. You make a good point. I also think it'd be a good idea to have him make a brief leave from the story after getting beat up by the protagonist's group, but then have him come back as his fellow ex-villain Serika-chan's boyfriend."

"What are you talking about? Masao should be eternally loyal to his master, Mistress Sana!"

"What do you two think I am!?"

I was getting teary-eyed listening to Rika and Sena get all fired up about this.

I can't believe they're trying to make me go from one of the lead roles to some random yankee character.

"Hmm, yeah, Onii-chan **doesn't look cool at all**, does he~ Onii-chan's kinda different than someone like Hirotaka, right?"

Maria made a clean slice right through my heart as she tilted her head to the side innocently.

"Kh..."

Yozora started to protest yet again, albeit weaker than before.

"B-but, Kodaka's *my* childhood friend, so..."

Yozora whispered in a somewhat frail-sounding voice.

"Mu..."

"...That's right, you were friends, weren't you?"

Rika and Sena both made strange looks on their faces.

Yozora locked on to both of them, and began pushing her point further.

"T-that's right! Hirotaka is Kuuya's childhood friend! That's why I chose Kodaka to play Hirotaka, since he was my childhood friend in real life too! What's wrong with that!?"

"Eh, i-it's not like there's anything wrong with it, but..."

Sena was overwhelmed and shut her mouth, but...

"...So you mean that if you, Yozora-senpai, don't play the role of Kuuya, then there's no reason for Kodaka-senpai to play the role of Hirotaka, correct?"

Rika wasn't fooled as easily, and came back with a cold refutation.

"...W-well... Yeah, I suppose that's true. But I'm the best person to play the lead role no matter how you look at it. I mean, we're pretty similar in terms of height, hairstyle, and a bunch of other stuff too..."

"Yes, according to what you wrote, but we could change those minor details if we wanted to, right? I don't think the charm of this story has much to do with the more trivial things like the characters' basic traits."

"W-well, yeah, but..."

Yozora made a complicated expression on her face.

Rika definitely has a point, the real charm of the story has to do with the overall plot and the interactions between the characters rather than the characters individually.

There's hardly any character traits that absolutely have to be a specific way. Especially when it comes to appearances.

"In fact, the main character is supposed to be a pretty boy with a curt attitude who's both athletic and intelligent, but when you consider the starting point of the story where he's isolated in class, as well as the developments from there on, don't you think it'd be a better idea to make him have a few more character flaws? With the way he is now, I get the feeling that even if Hirotaka never transferred in, he'd be able to solve his problems on his own."

"Yeah, you're right. Actually don't you think that Kuuya and Hirotaka are like... **way too similar**?"

"Uu..... Gh.....!"

Yozora let out a couple groans after receiving Rika's and Sena's criticisms.

...I have to say that I agree with them about Kuuya and Hirotaka.

The protagonist is too perfect, it doesn't really fit in with the rest of the story's setting.

I'm pretty sure that even Yozora would have to acknowledge that fact too, which is why she isn't denying any of it.

"...I-it's true that I managed on my own up until now, but..."

Yozora mumbled something like she was pouting, but it looks like nobody heard exactly what she said.

"Hence, we should think everything over again, including who should play the lead role. That said, we don't have much time to spend here discussing it, so I propose that we solve things with a vote."

"Yeah! I think that's a good idea too!"

Sena offered her support for Rika's suggestion.

Yozora seemed flustered, and said,

"W-who said you could do that!? I'm obviously the most suited to play Kuuya no matter how you think about it!"

"If it's so obvious, then you should win the vote no problem, right? Or do you think you won't get picked to play the lead role?"

Yozora's cheeks twitched in response to Rika's strangely antagonistic tone of voice.

"Kh... F-fine...! It's obvious who'll win anyway...!"

"OK, let's have everyone write down what they think the best casting is then. We can change the minor stuff later, so forget about that for now, and instead decide based on who fits the role best in terms of the overall story."

"Got it." "Understood." "Okay~"

Sena, Yukimura, and Maria all nodded at Rika.

"...Why do you all get to decide..."

Rika handed out sheets of paper for us to write our casting decisions on, while likely purposely ignoring Yozora's irritated mumbling.

"OK, let's make our casts now. And no complaining about the result, no matter how things turn out...!"

"Got it."

Casting, huh... Who should play what... Obviously I should play Hirotaka, but what about the others...

I slowly picked out a role for everyone while worrying over whether or not I was making the right choice.

A few minutes later we tallied up the votes for each role, but for some reason things turned out as follows:

Kuuya (protagonist) - Yukimura Kusunoki

Hirotaka (Kuuya's best friend) - Yozora Mikadzuki

Sana (class boss) - Maria Takayama

Serika (likes Hirotaka) - Sena Kashiwazaki

Nobuyuki (admires Hirotaka) - Rika Shiguma

Mari (Kuuya's little sister) - Kodaka Hasegawa

"""""""

WHYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!?"""""""

Yozora, Sena, Rika, and I all yelled in unison.

...Seriously, how did things turn out like this?

"H-hold on a second, let's tally the votes again..."

Yozora said while holding one hand to her forehead.

"Yeah, let's do that..." Rika said with a cold sweat running down her face as she grabbed the six casting lists, and then counted everything up again.

The lists were all anonymous, so we didn't know who voted for what, but as for who I voted for, I had Yukimura as Kuuya, myself as Hirotaka, Sena as Sana, Maria as Serika, Yozora as Nobuyuki, and Rika as Mari.

I thought Yukimura would be a better Kuuya than Yozora, since Kuuya's supposed to be a bit more flawed, and Yukimura's used to wearing men's clothes too.

I left Hirotaka and Sana the way Yozora had originally decided.

I couldn't really decide what to do with the rest of them, but I chose Maria to play Serika since she likes me already, I put Rika as Kuuya's little sister since she happened to be cosplaying in an outfit like something Kobato would wear today, and I put Yozora as Nobuyuki since that was the only role left.

When we counted up the votes, Yukimura won the role of Kuuya by a landslide, and most of us voted for Yozora as Hirotaka too.

The votes for everyone else were all over the place. There were only two votes each for Maria playing Sana, Sena playing Serika, Rika playing Nobuyuki, and me to play Mari, but that was enough for us to win those roles.

"The lead role... I will be playing... the lead role?"

Yukimura whispered in a happy sounding voice.

"Yay~! I get to be the big boss! I like this casting, I get to play the role I wanted!"

Maria must've been one of the votes for herself to play Sana, and she certainly seems happy she got the role. I wonder if she knows Sana is supposed to antagonize the protagonists. ...She probably doesn't, does she...

Rika and Sena looked both upset and irritated at the results, and Yozora wasn't much different with her cheeks twitching as she

mumbled a bunch of nonsense like, "Kh... Who would've thought making Hirotaka like Tomo-chan to make him cooler would backfire like this..."

".....It would appear that this ridiculous casting is the result of everyone combining their own little schemes together..."

Rika said with a difficult look on her face.

"Schemes?"

"It's nothing."

"....."

I was kinda curious about what she meant, but I had a more important point to make a remark about.

".....So, why am I the little sister? Who did it?"

I looked over my fellow club members with a cold stare, and upon doing so Sena looked away.

"So it was you, huh!?"

I yelled and stuck out my finger at Sena, causing her to get all flustered and say,

"I-I couldn't help it! I thought it'd be kinda funny, so I went with it!"

"That's why you 'couldn't help' making me the little sister...!?"

I seriously wish she'd stop doing this stupid crap in the spur of the moment!

"It's fine! I mean, if Kobato makes a perfect little sister then who knows, you might make a good little sister too!!"

"How does that make any sense!?"

"You're right, it doesn't..." said Sena along with a vague wry smile, and then added, "B-but I wasn't the only one! Someone else picked you for the little sister role too!"

"Oh yeah, that's right, isn't it..."

I got two votes, so there must be one other idiot who picked me to be the little sister.

"...But who was it?"

"Meee~!"

Maria raised her hand energetically.

".....Oh, you, huh."

This is all giving me a huge headache.

"...Umm... Maria, why did you pick me to be the little sister?"

"Well, see, Onii-chan is always my big brother, so I thought it'd be fun if Onii-chan wasn't a big brother for a little while!"

Maria explained, a big smile plastered on her face all the while.

She didn't mean anything bad by it either, so I can't even get mad at her.

"...But yeah, there's no way I can play that role. I think we should take another vo——"

I was in the middle of my sentence when I noticed Yukimura's pleading eyes staring at me.

"....."

"Umm, I think we should take another vo——"

".....uu."

Yukimura's eyes watered up as I tried to finish my sentence.

".....Yukimura, good luck with the lead role."

Yukimura's face brightened up like a light bulb as she made a fist in front of her chest.

"Yes, I'll give it my all."

Damn she's cute.

I then said, as Yukimura continued staring at me with a warm look in her eyes,

"...So, what should we do about my role?"

"Hmm... We can make Mari Kuuya's little brother instead. A delinquent little brother who doesn't get along with his big brother ... That should work fine with the story..."

Yozora said with a voice that sort of sounded like she just didn't care anymore.

"What... So you mean to say that I would become Aniki's aniki... ? So Aniki would be Aniki, and I would also be Aniki...? Aniki, I must say that I have become quite confused by all this."

Yukimura said, her eyes wide as she trembled with a mysterious sense of passion. I don't know what you're talking about either.

"Ehhh, you're gonna make Mari a boy? I kinda wanted to see Kodaka as a little sister."

"Ohh, Onii-chan's a big brother, but now he'll be a little brother ~? The world is full of crazy stuff!"

Sena and Maria said, making their own little comments, which got them both a wordless smack on the head from Yozora's flyswatter.

Strangely, Sena didn't show any resistance to it for once, and instead made a somewhat awkward look on her face.

"S-sorry about... all this."

"Huh?"

Yozora opened her eyes wide.

"I-I mean... making Kodaka into the little sister role means you have to spend time rewriting some of the script, so..."

"...What's wrong? Did you catch some weird disease? You're creeping me out, Meat..."

Sena blushed as Yozora looked at her with a face that honestly looked like she was creeped out.

"S-shut up! I-it's because your script... was actually... pretty good... I was thinking how... making Kodaka a little sister might, like, ruin it..."

For some reason, Yozora started blushing too, and turned her face away after seeing Sena fumble over her words as she looked down at the ground.

"H... Hmph, it's not like it'll take much time to turn a little sister into a little brother."

"R-really? Well, OK... if you say so."

Yozora and Sena were both utterly embarrassed.

Seeing these two of all people act like this towards each other was a pretty rare sight, and I couldn't help but feel a little happy about it.

...And so, that's how we decided on the cast for our movie, which allowed us to finally... it actually feels more like "at long last ," but anyway... we were finally able to begin making our movie for the cultural festival.

The Second Time

"Here. I fixed up the opening scenes, so we can at least start working on that."

It was now the next day after school.

The first thing Yozora said upon entering the clubroom was the above.

"Nice, good work."

I thanked Yozora, and we all took our scripts.

We talked a bit about it after we decided on the new cast yesterday, but aside from making Mari into a little brother so I can play the role (the name was obviously changed too), we noted a fair amount of points that needed to be revised.

According to Yozora it'd take a while to revise the whole script, so we decided that after she finished fixing up the opening scenes that we'd start filming and have Yozora continue revising at the same time.

I was impressed at how Yozora didn't complain about having to revise the script, and I began reading the new script with that in mind——... I began readi——...

".....Huh?"

A giant "?" appeared above my head.

"...What is this?"

Sena made a dubious expression.

The rest of the club members all wore similar looks of confusion .

"Alright, we'll go out and shoot these first few scenes now. Everyone get ready."

"H-hold it, Yozora!"

I said in a panic, trying to stop Yozora, who was trying to quickly move things along.

"What, Kodaka?"

Yozora asked in a level voice.

"What do you mean, 'what'... This is, like..."

I flipped through the script one more time just to be sure, and then timidly asked,

"...Isn't this a whole different story?"

"It's just your imagination."

"No it's not!"

Sena quickly retorted to Yozora's answer to my question.

The revised script Yozora had made for today was completely different from the script we read yesterday.

The biggest change was the large increase in appearances for the protagonist's little sister "Mari" turned little brother, "Kotarou."

It wasn't just the gender that changed, the story was now set up so that Kuuya and Kotarou were twin brothers going to the same school.

Mari didn't show up until around the middle of the story in the script from yesterday, but in the revised script Kotarou has constant appearances from basically the start of the story.

And not only that, but the protagonist, Kuuya, was in far fewer scenes now, to the point that there were more scenes where Kotarou and Hirotaka were together than there were scenes of Kuuya and Hirotaka.

Of course, it's not like it'd be weird for Hirotaka to be old friends with Kuuya's little brother too, but this is just way too different from when Kuuya had a little sister and not a little brother.

Here are some specific examples:

■Before

Hirotaka transfers into Kuuya's class.

Hirotaka was Kuuya's childhood friend.

Kuuya: "I-is that you, Hirotaka!?"

Hirotaka: "Yo, been a while hasn't it, Kuuya. Let's be friends again from now on!"

■After

Hirotaka transfers into Kuuya's class.

Hirotaka was Kuuya's childhood friend, and got along with Kuuya's little brother, Kotarou, too.

Kuuya: "E-excuse me, but is your name Nakagawa?"

Hirotaka: "Yo, been a while hasn't it, umm... Kuu...? Anyway, how's Kotarou doing these days? I wanna be friends with Kotarou again from now on!"

"Hirotaka forgot Kuuya's name!? And why is Kuuya calling Hirotaka 'Nakagawa' now!? And why is he acting so formal!?"

Yozora casually replied to my remarks by saying,

"I couldn't help it. Hirotaka and Kuuya never really got along in the first place."

"Huh!?"

The main point of the story got flipped on its head just now.

"Hirotaka saw Kuuya as more like... **a friend of a friend**. Kuuya was always with Kotarou, so they hung out as a group of three, but Kuuya wasn't really his friend."

"Don't you feel bad for Kuuya!? Why can't all three of them be friends!? What's so wrong about that!?"

I yelled, to which Yozora replied in a gentle voice as though teaching a child something new,

"Kodaka... the friends of a friend... aren't your friends."

"T-they're not...?"

"They're not. The truth is the time Hirotaka, Kotarou, and Kuuya spent together wasn't a group of 'three people,' but rather a group of '**two people plus one extra**.' "

"That's just way too sad for Kuuya!"

Although, it's true that I know what she's talking about...

Whenever I was in a group of three or four people at my old schools, it'd look like we were all getting along, but whenever we split up and it was just me and someone else, the conversation would die all of a sudden.

Whenever that happened, I'd always end up thinking, "Huh? Do this guy and I actually not get along very well...?"

"...I see... Kuuya was the extra in the group of 'two people plus one extra'... I guess you really couldn't help it then..."

I said, thoroughly convinced by Yozora.

However, that's when Sena jumped into the conversation.

"Hold it! I get how one person in a group of three might not really get along with the other two, but why does Kuuya have to be the extra!? Couldn't you have just made Kotarou the extra and left the story how it was!?"

Sena yelled, but Yozora didn't budge.

"I couldn't help it. It was only natural to me that if Kuuya had a little brother instead of a little sister that Hirotaka would've gotten along better with the little brother than Kuuya."

"Why!?"

"Because Kodaka's playing Kotarou... there was nothing I could do about it."

"There was plenty you could do about it... what, are you saying it's because he's your childhood friend again?"

"Exactly."

Yozora nodded as though boasting with her chest slightly puffed out in pride.

An unpleasant expression rose to Sena's face upon seeing that, and she then said——

"This is the present, it doesn't matter what happened in the past!!"

That one sentence was all it took,

".....What...?"

for the look on Yozora's face to freeze over.

".....Meat... what did you just say...?"

Yozora's voice was so heavy it sounded like it was echoing from beneath the ground.

It even felt like the air in the room had gotten heavier and colder.

"...It doesn't... matter...? You god damn..."

I unconsciously gulped after seeing Yozora's gaze of hatred that was so strong it felt murderous.

"...Oh boy..."

An uncomfortable cold sweat ran down Rika's face, and it might just be me, but Yukimura seems on edge too. Even Maria looks like she's terrified and about to burst into tears.

Faced with that overwhelming gaze being directed right at her,

"That's right. It doesn't matter."

Sena didn't falter in the least.

"It doesn't matter if you and Kodaka used to be friends; that's all in the past. What matters right now is that you revise the script for our movie the *right* way, god damn it."

Sena stated as though it were obvious, all the while taking the hatred in Yozora's gaze head on.

Yozora's face twisted in agony at her words.

"...Y-you god damn... Do you... Do you have any idea how I——"

Sena then yelled, cutting Yozora off.

"Are you deaf!? I said that crap doesn't matter! Quit living in the past and do what you have to do now, in the present!"

"...!"

Yozora was overwhelmed by Sena's pointed words—— and just then, tears started welling up in her eyes.

"...Uu...!"

...Those were the same words Sena used to answer me a week ago at the cafe in Nagaya when I asked her how she felt about Yozora and I being childhood friends.

——The past doesn't matter.

——It's stupid to keep letting the past hold you down.

Sena's words were so blunt... so optimistic... only looking ahead.

They were all too right.

They were all too dazzling.

They had a light to them so strong that someone trapped by their past could do nothing but try to avert their gaze.

...I was fine.

...But Yozora...

"...If only you... If only you weren't here, by now I'd...! ...Uu...!"

Yozora glared at Sena with both tears and hatred in her eyes, and then——

"Sena Kashiwazaki you big fat morooonnnnnn!!"

She yelled like a child before fleeing the scene.

"Yozora!?"

I was so flustered it took me a second to call out to her, but Yozora had already left the clubroom by the time I did.

BAM, went the door as it shut.

No way...

...If Yozora's and Sena's positions were reversed, then this would be something I've grown used to seeing here with the Neighbors Club, but...

"Sheesh... That idiot..."

Sena let out a forlorn sigh as she stared over at the door.

She then quietly added,

"...'If only you weren't here,' huh..."

"...Sena?"

There was a terribly sad look on her face.

"...I hate her guts too, but... I've never thought things would be better without her..."

"Haaaaaaaaaaaa~~" went Sena as she let out a big sigh.

"...I'm going home for today too."

No sooner had she finished her sentence than had Sena grabbed her bag and left the clubroom.

"H-hey, Sena...!? You too...?"

"...What should we do now, Kodaka-senpai?"

The remaining club members, Rika, Yukimura, and Maria, all looked to me for an answer.

It's not like I knew what we should do now either, but despite that, I said,

"...I guess we can just call it a day."

"Wha...!?"

"Uoh!?"

Upon leaving the clubroom and entering the chapel, I ran into Yozora standing outside.

"Yozora!? Didn't you go home...?"

I asked, to which Yozora responded by awkwardly fiddling with her bangs as she said,

"...I left my bag in the clubroom."

"Oh yeah, you did, didn't you... Should we work on the movie after all then? Ah, but Sena already went home."

"I know."

The expression on Yozora's face turned into one of displeasure the second Sena's name came up.

She must've seen Sena leaving then. Did she come back to get her bag now that Sena was gone?

"...Anyway, what're you gonna do about the script?"

"....."

Yozora didn't say a word in response to my question.

"If we can make it work with that revised script you made, I don't have any real problems with it. I think it's kind of a waste since the original was so good, but as long as the revised version is good too, I doubt even Sena will complain."

"....."

The silence continues.

However, Yozora eventually said, in a tiny voice,

"...Which do you think is better, Kodaka? Do you think Hirotaka should be old friends with Kuuya, or Kotarou?

So basically, do I think Hirotaka (played by Yozora) should be friends with Kuuya (played by Yukimura), or Kotarou (played by me)?

I pondered the question, including the information Yozora left out.

"...Well, it's a movie, right? I don't mind who he was friends with as long as it's interesting."

Yozora pursed her lips as though she were pouting upon hearing my answer.

".....I should be childhood friends with Kodaka."

Yozora murmured something, but I couldn't really hear her.

"Eh, what'd you say?"

"Nothing! I was just talking about how annoying Meat is!"

"O-oh, OK."

I then said, while wincing at Yozora's wild tone of voice,

"...But, well, I do think what Sena said has some truth to it."

"Mu..."

Yozora furrowed her brow.

"...You shouldn't let your past control you so much that it... ruins the script."

"...Mu..."

Yozora made an irritated look on her face, and then

"...Which is more important to you, Kodaka, your memories from 10 years ago, or now?"

She threw that loaded question my way.

"".....There's no way I can just pick one."

That was the only way I could answer her.

"...You really are wishy-washy, aren't you?"

Yozora said with a tinge of anger in her voice.

I then decided to ask her in return,

"...Then could you pick one?"

"Eh?"

Yozora made a startled look on her face.

"Which is more important to you, Yozora, 10 years ago, or now?
"

10 years ago—— the time when Yozora and I... when Sora and Taka were best friends.

Now—— the time we spend doing all kinds of stupid stuff with other people who don't have friends like us.

"...I... O-obviously 10 years ago is more important..."

I pressed Yozora further after hearing her weak answer.

"So right now isn't important to you then?"

"Uu....."

Yozora kept quiet.

The time we spent together 10 years ago was wonderful.

But the present... the things we do now are fun enough that I can't possibly say they're not important.

I'm sure that Yozora feels the same way.

Yozora made a weak wry smile, sighed as though spitting it out, and then quietly said,

".....That's a hard question~..."

I made a wry smile as well after hearing Yozora's answer.

"...See?"

"Yeah..."

We spent the next few moments staring at each other with wry smiles on our faces.

After spending those few moments in silence, I don't know who moved first, but one of us looked away, and we each walked off.

Yozora headed for the chapel.

I headed for the school gates.

Her Answer

A tense atmosphere filled the room when Yozora entered the clubroom the next day.

Sena, Rika, Yukimura, Maria, and I were all in there already, and it'd been awkward the whole time as we awaited Yozora's arrival.

We all gulped as we watched Yozora strut through the clubroom with a sullen look on her face.

Yozora seemed totally unfazed by our stares as she silently sat down in her chair, and opened her bag.

She then took a thick stack of several sheets of paper out, and flopped them on the desk.

"I finished revising the script."

Yozora told us, with a cold look on her face in a calm—— yet somewhat triumphant-sounding voice.

"Then hurry up and show it to us."

Sena said, with that same domineering attitude she always has —— it was as if that fight she had with Yozora yesterday never even happened.

"Hmph, that's what I was going to do anyway. I don't need you telling me what to do."

Yozora answered her in her usual antagonistic tone of voice, and then passed out the scripts.

We all timidly read through the script.

I wonder just what kind of changes Yozora made this time.

Is the boy Hirotaka used to be friends with going to be the protagonist, Kuuya? Or will it be the little brother, Kotarou?

I continued reading through the script, nervous all the while——...

"......This isn't half bad."

Sena said, having finished reading first, with the edges of her mouth lifted up into a faint smile.

"Hmph, it was a piece of cake," Yozora curtly replied.

"...Yeah, good work."

I said, having finished now too, to which Yozora went "Hmph... " and exhaled out her nose as though she were embarrassed.

The newly revised script was almost identical to the original, with only the minor changes to the characters to reflect the new cast.

Kotarou now showed up halfway through the story just like Mari did, he wasn't a twin anymore, and was back to being two years younger than Kuuya like Mari was too.

The "delinquent little brother" took the place of the "rebellious little sister", and it fit into the story perfectly.

"You have done excellent work here, Anego."

Yukimura said, seemingly relieved.

Now that I think about it, Yukimura was the one whose character changed the most in the previous revision.

A ton of her character's scenes got cut, and she was reduced to being a side-role instead of the lead.

Yukimura was really happy when she found out she'd get to play the lead, so I'd felt bad for her about that.

Taking that into consideration, I think that having Kuuya be Hirotaka's childhood friend is better too.

Yukimura stared at the script as if it were her treasure, and then made a tender smile.

"Alright, let's make one heck of a movie, Yukimura-aniki!"

"Eh?"

I said as I gently placed my hand on top of Yukimura's head, which startled her and caused her face to turn beet red as she fell to the floor.

"Hey- Eh!? Hey!? Yukimura!? Yukimuraaa!?"

I hurriedly moved to help her.

"...I am terribly sorry, Aniki. I let myself get too excited."

Yukimura said absentmindedly, her cheeks still a shade of red.

"N-no prob..."

Are we really gonna be ok with her as the lead role...?

I was quickly starting to get worried about the future of our movie.

"...Yeah, Rika likes this way better too. You did a good job on this, Yozora-senpai."

Rika said while lightly thunking her script on the table to re-align all the sheets of paper.

"Still, you worked this out pretty fast. Didn't you say it'd take a while to finish?"

Now that Rika mentioned it, Yozora did say it'd take her some time to revise the whole thing, which is why we'd planned on filming while she revised at the same time, but she'd actually finished the whole thing already.

"Hmph. It didn't take much time because there wasn't much to change story-wise."

"...So you said it'd take a while right after we decided on the cast because you planned on increasing Kotarou's scenes, correct?"

Yozora didn't say anything and instead averted her eyes before saying,

"A-anyway, there aren't any complaints now, right!? Let's hurry up and get to filming. There shouldn't be anyone in my classroom after school."

"Okay~" Rika replied as she cheerfully raised her hand in the air .

...Anyhow, now that that's out of the way.

We can finally—— This time we can really... we can really, truly , after the third time, honestly, at long, long last, finally start filming our movie.

Pegasus Fantasy

The filming for our movie went so well you wouldn't ever think it was the Neighbors Club that was filming it.

Anyone who wasn't in the scene we were filming took care of the camera.

Rika brought her own digital handy cam that she made, which had all kinds of fancy features, but was still simple enough for novices like us to use.

As for the tools aside from that... we also used a boom mic and a dolly that Sena provided.

Honestly, just messing around with the camera was pretty fun, and at first we all just played around with it and didn't do any real filming, but I think it was thanks to that that we were able to make such a fun atmosphere.

Everyone was really excited once we got started, and it stayed that way as we continued our filming.

We decided to have Rika handle the editing once we were done filming.

None of us, aside from Yozora, were that great at acting, but we never had high hopes for that anyway, considering this is just something being put together by a bunch of novices like us.

We all got embarrassed watching our terrible acting on film, we all laughed together when someone messed up, we all talked about how weird our voices sounded after getting recorded, and, for better or worse, we continued on with that kind of laid-back atmosphere.

We were now on the fourth day of our filming.

Today was Saturday, but there were still plenty of students at school to work on their projects for the festival, giving the school a very lively atmosphere.

We were no exception, and filmed from morning until evening, having gotten everything we planned on doing done.

"OK, we'll meet up tomorrow at nine, then."

Yozora stated our plans for tomorrow, signaling the end of our activities for the day.

Yozora, Sena, Yukimura, and I all headed for our respective homes.

Maria has her work as a sister though, and apparently Rika was gonna go work on the editing in the Rika room.

I said goodbye to the rest of the club members and started walking home, but as I was——

"Well, if it isn't Kodaka."

All of a sudden someone with a beautiful voice called out to me.

The owner of the voice, who had come walking out of a nearby building, was a middle aged man with a handsome face who was wearing casual clothes and had his hair knotted up in the back.

It was Pegasus Kashiwazaki—— Sena's father, and the chairman of Saint Chronica Academy.

"Chairman!?"

I was surprised to run into him at a time like this.

"Heh... what a coincidence."

The chairman seemed strangely happy as he lightly jogged his way over to me.

Seeing someone who looks as dignified as him move like that seemed awkward to me.

"Ah, hello, it's nice to see you..."

I started off by giving him a simple greeting.

"Indeed," the chairman replied with a composed nod as he looked around at the students coming and going around us.

"This pre-festival atmosphere is quite refreshing, don't you agree? It brings back memories..."

The chairman said as he cheerfully thinned his normally stern-looking eyes.

"Yes... I suppose you're right."

I gave him a simple reply so I wouldn't look rude.

"How are your preparations for the festival going?"

"Ah, we're doing fine."

"Good. It's nice to see you so full of vigor even on a day off."

The chairman happily nodded to himself.

"If I remember correctly, you were all making a movie, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Movies are great. Hayato used to drag me to them all the time.."

"Chairman?"

The chairman's sudden silence was odd, and it might have just been me, but his face seemed red.

"...No, it's nothing. M-more importantly, what kind of movie are you all making?"

He asked, clearly trying to change the subject.

"Sena never told you?"

"She didn't... We don't have much time to talk to one another... All she told me is that your club is making a movie."

"Oh, is that so?"

Well, the chairman *is* probably pretty busy with work and stuff.

I guess rich people have their own problems too.

Anyway, I began giving the chairman a little summary of what kind of movie we were filming while pondering those thoughts.

I told him how the script was an original work written by a fellow club member.

I told him how it was a refreshing piece about friendship.

I told him how the filming was going smoothly, and that the final product seemed like it was going to turn out pretty good.

"...Hm, I'd very much like for you to show it to me when it's done."

The chairman smiled happily.

"Having someone I know watch it might be kind of embarrassing, haha..."

I made a light smile as well.

"By the way, Kodaka."

The chairman started up a new topic, as though it was a mere afterthought to our little chit-chat about the movie.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Is going out with Sena going well?"

"Huh?"

A giant question mark appeared above my head after being asked such an incomprehensible question.

The chairman made a strong look on his face along with a pleasant faint smile.

"Umm, what exactly...?"

The chairman smiled even more after seeing me tilt my head in confusion.

"Hahaha, is talking about this kind of thing too embarrassing for you?"

"No, um... it's not embarrassing, it's more like..."

I hesitated for a moment, but then timidly asked him,

"...What do you mean by... 'going out,' exactly?"

"Haha, you don't have to play dumb about it."

The chairman seemed to be even happier than before now, but I was still clueless.

"Umm... No, really, what are you talking about?"

"".....Mu?"

The chairman appeared to slowly realize that I wasn't playing dumb, and really had no idea what he meant.

"".....Eh?"

The chairman's eyes and mouth warped into an odd shape, and he tilted his head to the side.

He then asked, as though trying to confirm it beyond a shadow of a doubt,

"...You *are* going out with Sena, aren't you?"

"Eh...? Not that I know of."

I answered him with a completely serious look on my face.

"".....?"

"".....?"

The chairman and I spent a few moments staring at each other with question marks over our heads.

I could see the cold sweat run down the chairman's cheek as he darted his eyes around, and then,

"

HUUUUUHHHHHHHH!?"

He let out that hilarious yell.

The chairman gasped as he realized what he'd just done, and went "Ahem," as he awkwardly cleared his throat.

"...Some urgent business has come up. Farewell for now, Kodaka. I'll see you later."

"Uh-huh..."

The chairman then clumsily turned around, and the next moment he was sprinting away.

"WHAAAAAAAT THHHHEE HEEECCCCCCCCCKKK!?"

Every single student who saw the chairman screaming as he ran off at an incredible speed looked utterly shocked.

...That old guy's pretty funny, gotta give him that...

Is what I thought to myself with a confused look on my face as though it had nothing to do with me.

My Fiancée and Childhood Friend Are At Each Other's Throats?

It was now Sunday, the day after the chairman Pegasus dashed away from me.

I came to school today so we could do some more filming like we have been.

The school was as lively as ever with preparations for the festival, despite it being a Sunday morning.

In the past week the halls of this school have been filled with displays, cafes, haunted houses, stages, and all kinds of other amazing stuff that finally made it feel like the festival was almost here.

The school is usually kept pretty clean, and this new messy look had a certain freshness to it.

We've gotta give it our all on our movie too...

I opened the door to the clubroom while pondering those thoughts.

The instant after I got in though,

"Ah! Kodaka! C-come with me for a bit!"

Sena, who was already in the clubroom, came over to me as soon as she saw who it was, and then started pulling my arm.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing, Meat!?"

Yozora yelled after her from inside the clubroom.

"I need to talk to him for a second! We'll be right back!"

Sena yelled back, and then dragged me through the chapel's halls at a brisk pace.

"H-hey, Sena!?"

As I was being pulled by Sena—— it wasn't exactly hard to guess, but anyway, I had a pretty good idea what Sena wanted to " talk to me" about.

Sena dragged me all the way out to the incinerator behind the school.

The school was filled with students today too, and this was probably one of the only spots where nobody came.

"Phew~... So hot..."

Sena let out a big sigh, and took off her vest.

I was sweating a little bit too after having been dragged around so fast.

"...So, what do you need to talk to me about?"

I was pretty confident in my guess, but I asked Sena to be sure.

Sena awkwardly looked at me as though she were trying to sneak a peek of my face, and said,

".....Apparently Papa thought that you and I were going out..."

I knew it.

I let out a big sigh, and told her,

"...I was surprised when the chairman told me that yesterday too. ...So, why did he think that in the first place?"

I asked, which caused Sena to awkwardly avert her gaze.

"...Sena?"

"Ah, um... Welll~... How to put this..."

I gave Sena a disdainful look as she fumbled over her words.

"D-don't glare at me like that..."

Sena looked a little scared.

...I didn't mean to glare.

Have people been thinking I was glaring at them when I make that look this whole time...?

I continued silently waiting for Sena's explanation while buckling from my sudden realization.

"Umm, you see..."

"Go on."

"Y-you know how we all went to the amusement park before?"

"Hm? Ah, yeah."

I simply nodded, even though I thought it was strange for her to bring that up all of a sudden.

It was exactly one month ago that we all went to a big amusement park called "Yokoshima Wonderland" in another prefecture.

"And, well, I got those tickets for us from Papa."

"Oh yeah, that's right."

If I remember right, the chairman got the tickets he gave Sena from someone he knows at work.

"You see... when he gave me the tickets..."

Sena made an awkward weak smile.

"...Just spit it out already."

I pressed her to go on, despite feeling anxious about what she was going to say.

"I let something slip in front of Papa... It was kind of... iffy..."

"Iffy?"

I tilted my head, causing Sena to dart her eyes around even more than before, and then,

"It was something like, 'Yay~ Now I can make Kobato-chan my little sister~♥'..."

.....?

"Huh?"

I furrowed my brow, unsure of what she meant by that.

Upon my doing so, Sena's face burst into a shade of red.

"W-what I mean is...! I went on about making Kobato-chan my little sister, which made Papa get the wrong idea about us!"

"Eh? ? ? ? What are you getting at?"

Sena seemed to have gotten a little angry after hearing that, and yelled,

"God, you're so slow! We'd have to get, um, you know, m-m-m-m-**married** in order for Kobato-chan to actually be my little sister! Get it now!?"

"W-well, yeah, that's certainly true..."

I was still shaken from having her bring up marriage all of a sudden.

Sena then continued on, and said,

"Now that I think about it, Papa said a bunch of stuff back then... I was so excited I didn't really pay attention to it though..."

"W-what do you mean, 'a bunch of stuff'?"

"Like, he asked me, 'You plan on making Kobato your little sister?' and 'Are you two getting along well?' and other stuff like that with a serious look on his face..."

I could feel my face going stiff.

"...And what did you tell him when he asked you?"

Sena awkwardly looked away after hearing my question.

"I-I don't really remember, but... I think I said something like, '**Of course! We're having tons of fun together!**'..."

"Are you kidding me?"

I can't believe she said that to her father...

"...Haha, well... you see... When he said 'you two' I thought he meant Kobato and I, not you and me..."

"It's not like you get along that well with Kobato either."

I said, stating the obvious criticism of how Sena had replied to her father as a cold sweat began to run down the side of her face.

...Now then, let's think about this from the chairman's point of view.

There's a boy, me, who his daughter, Sena, seems to get along with pretty well.

Then, all of a sudden his daughter started talking about making that boy's little sister, Kobato, into her own little sister.

...Yeah, I'm pretty sure anybody would think that she was talking about getting married to the boy given that context.

I mean, who on Earth would think that somebody could be so crazy about someone else's little sister that they'd seriously want to make her their own little sister?

.....

"Are you retarded!?"

I yelled with all the force I could muster.

"...I-I truly regret my most shameful of actions..."

Sena said in a way like Yukimura would as she dejectedly hung her head.

I let out a long, long, sigh, and then said,

"Haa... Well, you at least explained all this to the chairman, right?"

"Yeah..." said Sena with a nod.

"That's good then. So long as he knows what's really going on now..."

Hmm, now that I think about it, the night before we went to the amusement park ——the night Sena made the chairman think we were getting married—— was the same night I got that call from Dad asking me if I was getting married to Sena.

I feel a little bad for the chairman, who got so excited he called Dad, but it's better that he knows the truth now.

Just as I was starting to feel relieved about the whole matter,

"I told him... but the part from here on is what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Huh!? There's more!?"

"Yeah..."

Sena nodded and gave me a stiff smile as I stood there, shocked.

"Just so you know, this isn't because of anything I did, OK!? I never knew about this either until I had to explain things to Papa yesterday!"

"O-OK."

Sena then looked at me with upturned eyes, having finished her little preface, and said,

"Apparently you and I are... **engaged**."

.....
.....

.....
.....Huh!?

...My brain just stopped working for a second there...

"...Kodaka? Are you OK?"

"Y-yeah..."

A few moments later, after my brain was fully functioning again, I asked Sena to confirm what I'd just heard.

"We're... en... gaged...?"

"Yeah..."

Sena nodded, her face a noticeable shade of red.

"A-apparently it's like, something your papa and my papa agreed on back when we were still babies. Basically... I'm your **fiancée**."

"M-my fiancée... This is like we're in some TV show..."

I was absolutely astonished as Sena continued talking.

"Papa said they made a written agreement about it too, and it had our and our papas' thumb prints on it when he showed me."

"...They went that far...? Wait, our thumb prints!?"

I obviously have no memory of stamping my thumb print on that agreement.

I furrowed my brow, and as I did Sena said,

"They were like, reaaaally small and cute. There's no way to be sure they're really ours, but I doubt Papa would go that far just to trick me, so they're probably real."

"...I-I see... I don't remember it at all..."

"I don't remember it either, but, look..."

Sena pulled a single photograph out of her skirt pocket as she let her sentence trail off.

...It was a picture of a pair of children, both of whom looked about two or three years old.

The picture showed an intelligent looking little girl, and a snot-nosed little boy happily playing with a set of building blocks together.

.....Is this...

"Apparently we met each other a looooooong time ago."

Sena voiced that destructive statement, confirming my suspicions.

"...No way."

"There were a bunch of other photos too, but I took this one since I looked the smartest in it."

Sena said along with a shy smile on her face.

"...I see... So I met you a long time ago, huh."

Dad and the chairman are old best friends.

It's not weird for Sena and I to have met... In fact, it'd be weirder if two friends never showed their kids to each other.

Why did I never think of this before?

"I see..."

"Yeah..."

A strange atmosphere came down upon us.

I mean, neither of us remembers it, and us having met a long time ago doesn't really mean anything, but...

Somehow, this feels... awkward.

"Ehe... feels kinda weird, doesn't it?"

Sena had a vague sense of shyness to her voice; looks like she feels the same way I do about all this.

"Y-yeah, sure does..."

I said, simply trying to keep the conversation going, and then added,

"B-but anyway, that aside,"

"Yeah."

"About us being e-engaged,"

"Y-yeah."

...God my face is burning up.

I'm still a high school student here... I don't even have any friends, let alone a girlfriend.

Just saying the word "engaged" is embarrassing.

"We can just ignore some dumb engagement we never agreed to ."

Sena wore a look of disappointment on her face for a brief moment after hearing what I had to say, but then bounced back, and replied,

"Y-yeah, I know, right!? Our papas just went and decided all that stuff on their own! It's got nothing to do with us!"

"Yeah," I said with a nod, "...Ah, but... 'papas' probably isn't the right word... I doubt that my dad even remembers making that promise..." If Dad did remember the promise, then he would've said something about it when he called me a month ago.

However, when the chairman told him that we were getting married, he just wrote it off as "Zaki having the alcohol do the talking for him."

...Yeah... No doubt about it, he doesn't remember it at all... I feel a little bad for Pegasus again now.

"Anyway, like I said, we can just ignore the whole thing!"

I said in a slightly peppy tone of voice, trying to clear away the awkward atmosphere.

Sena nodded in response.

"Y-yeah! Just ignore it, just ignore it! ...I wish we didn't have to completely ignore it though."

"Eh?"

"I-it's nothing!"

Sena yelled as though she was trying to hide something.

"I don't need any stupid engagement, I'll make Kobato-chan into my little sister all on my own!"

"Would you mind giving up on that already?"

...Well, her creepy declaration aside, it feels good to see Sena acting like her usual optimistic self.

"Now then... we should probably get back to the clubroom. Let's do some great filming today too."

I said with an energetic smile before turning around and starting to walk off.

But, as I did I heard Sena mumble something behind me.

"...Well, we might be OK with it, but..."

"?"

I turned around, wondering what Sena was getting at, upon which a faint wry smile found its way to her face as she said,

"...I'm a little worried about how that idiot will take it, is all."

"...Ah, yeah."

It's true that that's the one thing that has me a bit concerned, but ...

"It's not like we have to tell the rest of them about this, right? It's got nothing to do with them, after all."

I tried to make my voice sound as casual as possible.

"Y-you... think so?"

Sena seemed a bit unsatisfied about something, but in the end, she said,

"I, guess... you're right..." along with a nod of agreement.

And so, the two of us returned to the clubroom while carrying our new strange secret——...

"What took you two so long?"

Yozora's voice of displeasure greeted Sena and I upon our return to the clubroom.

Yozora, Yukimura, and Rika were all here already.

"J-just some little stuff. Anyway, let's get filming!"

Sena said as though trying to avoid the topic.

"Hmph..."

Yozora let out a strangely upset-sounding "hmph", and then said as she got up off the couch,

"Well, whatever. Let's go then. I want to shoot the scene on the track field first today."

I was relieved.

Good, now we don't have to worry about anyone finding out about all that nonsense about us dating and being engaged and whatever.

The chairman just got the wrong idea about the dating thing, and Sena and I are the only ones who know about it anyway, so we should be safe..... Wait, huh?

I get the feeling I'm forgetting something...

No point in thinking about it when you've already got Sena though, I suppose——

Kate Takayama's words from about 10 days ago ran through my mind, and literally the instant they did,

BANG!

The door to the clubroom flung open.

"Ahaha~! We're makin' a movie today too~! Ah! Onii-chan! It's Onii-chan! I'm making a movie with Onii-chan today too! Ahahahaha!"

Maria burst into the room full of energy, and gave me a big hug upon seeing me like she always does.

"Oh yeah, hey Onii-chan! I heard something from the old hag yesterday~ Are you really engaged to Sena!? Is she what you'd call your, um, fiancée!? Having a fiancée must mean you really are an adult, huh, Onii-chan~ You're so awesome~! Ahahahaha!!"

""Bfft!?""

Sena and I both choked spectacularly after having what we'd just decided to keep a secret thrown out in the open for all to hear.

...Thud.

Yozora dropped her bag onto the floor.

Yozora stared at me with a look of utter shock on her face.

"...W-what's going on... here...?"

Yozora's voice nearly cracked as she spat out those words.

Rika and Yukimura were both staring at me with dumbfounded looks on their faces as well.

Sena and I looked at each other... and then each let out a sigh.

"...Y-your fiancée... And you met each other when you were babies, too....."

Yozora said, seemingly completely out of it right now.

Sena and I didn't hide a thing, and told the rest of the club members everything about the chairman's misunderstanding, including the part about the arranged marriage our fathers decided on without our knowing.

We showed them the picture of us when we were babies too.

"A-anyway, it's got nothing to do with us now, right?"

"Yeah, that's right!"

Sena followed up my sentence with one of her own to show her agreement with me.

However, Yozora still seemed pretty shocked by the whole thing.

"...'Scuse me, Mrs. Rika."

Yozora started talking to Rika, who was standing next to her with a frown on her face, in a voice like some sickly old lady.

"...What seems to be the matter, Mrs. Yozora?"

Rika replied, talking like an old person as well. Yozora then asked her,

"...Who do you think one has a stronger relationship with, one's childhood friend, or one's fiancée?"

"Generally speaking, I believe one would have a stronger relationship with their fiancée."

Rika answered immediately, completely expressionless.

"I knew it..." Yozora said, along with a weak laugh.

"And apparently they met each other when they were little too. That means she counts as his childhood friend as well."

"It does, doesn't it..." Yozora said, along with a sigh this time.

Sena irritatedly ran her hand through her hair after seeing Yozora act like that, and said,

"Ahh, come on, you're so annoying! We both said it doesn't matter, so what are you moping for, you idiot!!"

Smack!

Sena whacked Yozora on the head with her palm.

Yozora glared at Sena for a second, but quickly went back to moping again.

"Argh!! Come on!! Let's go film already!"

Sena said, and then left the clubroom.

"...Well, Sena-senpai's exactly right, you know, Yozora-senpai."

Rika said with a wry smile on her face.

"There's no point in getting caught up in the past or random stuff your parents decided without asking you. Let's just be positive about things!"

Rika took the camera in her hand and left the room, following after Sena.

"Haaa..."

Yozora let out another big sigh, and then smiled at me.

"...Yeah... She's right... I just... don't even care anymore..."

Yozora said in a voice that sounded like it was about to disappear before she started walking off.

Somehow, she looked a bit smaller than usual to me.

After that fiasco was over, our filming went along as smoothly as ever.

Yozora went back to her usual sullen, tyrannical attitude a short while after we started filming as well.

Nobody said a word about the whole marriage thing, and I'd thought that this would be the end of it, but——...

The Fall of Yozora Mikadzuki

It was now late Sunday, some hours after we all found out about Sena and I being engaged.

We'd finished filming a little bit ago, so I said my goodbyes to everyone, and left the chapel.

As I was walking towards the school gates amidst the sunset, I saw a sister sitting on a bench going "that hits the spot!" like some old man after taking a gulp of her pop.

Apparently she saw me too, because she went, "Yo, Onii-chan," and casually called out to me.

"I've got a bone to pick with you..."

I sighed and knit my brows as I walked over to sister Kate, causing her to go, "Hmm~?" and made a confused look on her face.

"I had a lot of trouble today thanks to you."

"Huh?"

Kate tilted her head as I explained what had happened earlier.

"Ahh, sorry 'bout that."

Kate gave me a light apology along with a wry smile, and added,

"But ya' know, Onii-chan, it's not like I'm the only one who knows about you and Sena being engaged."

".....Eh?"

I could feel my face going stiff as Kate continued on.

"It's 'cause Pegasus blabs about everything. Most of the sisters and the teachers here all know about it, and I wouldn't be surprised if there were some students who get along well with their teachers who know about it too."

Are you kidding me...?

"That old man needs to keep his mouth shut!"

"Haha, I bet it's 'cause he was so happy about it. I doubt he thought there was any need to hide it either."

Kate said along with another wry smile.

"But, I see, so Pegasus was just jumping to conclusions, huh..."

"Eh? What'd you say?"

I asked Kate, who'd started mumbling something in a strangely shy-sounding voice.

"It's nothing~"

Kate made a big happy smile for some reason.

"By the way, Onii-chan, are you guys really filming a movie?"

"Hm? Yeah."

"Sounds fun~ I really like movies too, ya' know. I rent a bunch of 'em to watch when I've got the time."

"Oh?"

"What kind of movie are you guys makin'?"

"Maria didn't tell you?"

I asked Kate, prompting a wry smile to form on her face as she replied,

"She came home one day all happy and told me 'I'm making a movie with Onii-chan,' but... that was all I got out of her."

"Ahh."

I made a wry smile too.

It's true that Maria probably wouldn't really get what the movie's about even if we explained it to her.

Heck, it's pretty doubtful that she even knows what the overall plot is.

"Where to start... Well, the movie we're making is——"

.....

I told Kate all about the movie in pretty fine detail.

Kate seemed to be enjoying herself as she listened, and when I finished, she said,

"I see. Sounds just like *The Sun On Top of the Hill*."

"*The Sun On Top of the Hill*?"

I asked Kate, since I'd never heard of it before, to which Kate happily responded,

"Yeah, it's a pretty famous Japanese movie among movie lovers. I like it a lot myself too. I'd love to see your guys' when it's done."

"You don't say. I'll have to go rent it on the way home and check it out then."

"Yeah, you totally should. Let me know what you thought about it after you watch it!"

Kate showed me an incredibly cute smile befitting a girl her age.

On my way home from school I rented *The Sun On Top of the Hill* from a video rental store I stopped at, and later that night I put it in our DVD player at home to watch it.

I thought watching a famous movie that's similar to ours might come in handy as we finish making it.

According to the summary written on the case, it's a story of friendship where the protagonist is isolated in his class, but then one day he reunites with his old best friend who transfers into his class, and they face many trials and tribulations together.

I see what Kate meant now. This summary is identical to our movie's.

But, it's not like this summary is all that unique. In fact, you could probably say it's more cliché than anything.

It'll be interesting to see how some real movie pros handled the same overall story.

The script Yozora wrote was actually pretty damn good though.

I wonder if maybe our movie's more interesting than the pros'... I began watching the movie with those thoughts in the back of my mind.

——...About an hour and 30 minutes later.

The movie was over.

The movie was, just as Kate said, an incredibly fascinating work of art.

Apparently it was released a whole 10 years ago, but it didn't feel old at all.

The cast didn't have any flashy idols in it, but was instead made up of a group of young actors with some impressive acting skills.

The movie itself wasn't flashy either, but it had meticulous well-done camerawork, and music that always got you pumped up for each of the big scenes.

Of course, the most important part of the movie, the story, was good as well.

The story mostly takes place in the school they go to, and the " various trials and tribulations" feel like things all of us might have experienced, and some are even things that I myself *have* experienced in the past. They all feel very realistic, and I can understand how the characters feel to an almost painful extent.

However, it's that deep bond of friendship between them that allows them to overcome all those difficulties that's truly moving.

Overall the story is sort of dark, but there are comedy scenes as well, and in the end it's not just the protagonist and his best friend,

but the all the people around them too—— including some of the people who tormented them before—— who come together and create an astounding and beautiful happy end to the story.

The movie was practically identical to ours aside from the names of some things, like the characters and the school, and surprisingly, **everything from the order of events, to their resolutions, to the flow between them, and even the movie's lines were exactly the same as ours.**

"....."

.....Yep.

.....I know... It's OK, I know...

It's not that *The Sun On Top of the Hill* is just like our movie.

It's our movie that's just like *The Sun On Top of the Hill*.

.....No... It's not "just like" it...

Basically, the point is,

that Yozora's script,

"IS A DAMN GIANT RIP - OFFFFFFFFFFF!!"

It was now after school the next day.

By the time I got to the clubroom, everyone aside from Kobato was already there.

Our scriptwriter and director Ms. Mikadzuki had her script on the table, and was mumbling, "...Hrm... How should we do this scene..." while tapping the script with a red ballpoint pen and making a difficult look on her face.

I cautiously started talking to Yozora as she was in the midst of doing all that.

"...Hey, Ms. young writer in distress."

"What is it, Kodaka? I'm busy right now."

Yozora ran a hand through her hair and looked over at me with a grumpy look on her face, to which I responded by taking the DVD for *The Sun On Top of the Hill* out of my bag.

The case wasn't a colorful one you'd get if you bought it, but rather a simple clear plastic one from the rental store, so I doubt she could easily see what it was.

"......?"

Yozora made a confused look on her face, so I told her,

"This is the DVD for *The Sun On Top of the H*——"

Clang!! Bam!!

Yozora got up out of her chair and started to make her escape from the clubroom before I could even finish my sentence!

"Wha- Yozora!?" "Senpai!?" "Anego?" "Wah!?"

I yelled to my fellow club members, who were shocked by Yozora's sudden action,

"Don't let her get away!"

"As you wish." "Yayy!" "I don't really get it, but OK!"

Yukimura, Maria, and Sena all moved to block Yozora's path as soon as I gave the order, and then lunged at her.

Yozora was easily caught by the group of three.

"Ugh! You bunch of little...! .....Kh..."

Yozora gave up soon after, and hung her head in shame.

It was now about two hours after Yozora's little incident.

We made Yozora sit *seiza*-style on the floor.

A placard that read **"I plagiarized someone else's work"** was hanging down from her neck.

The placard was actually Maria's beloved(?) one that Kate always makes her wear while sitting in the same *seiza*-style when she does something bad.

...Anyway, back to right after we captured Yozora.

Once it was clear Yozora wasn't getting away, I explained that it was highly likely Yozora plagiarized the script for our movie from *The Sun On Top of the Hill*.

Yozora denied any wrongdoing (she said it was only a coincidence they were similar, and that she simply had to go to the bathroom really bad at the same time I showed her the DVD), so we quickly formed a "Yozora Mikadzuki Plagiarism Inspection Team," and compared Yozora's script with copy of the movie I brought.

The verdict: everyone declared her to be guilty.

Even the ever-stubborn Yozora admitted she "used a part of it as a reference."

The remains of my hopes that she didn't actually plagiarize were dashed when I heard that.

"So, why did you try to pull this bullshit? Well?"

Rika interrogated Yozora, who was still sitting *seiza*-style with her head hanging dejectedly, while loudly chewing some gum and acting like a punk trying to pick a fight.

Incidentally, Rika was dressed in the boy's uniform she was using for the movie, and had her hair all slicked back.

She also had a fake sword with her, although I have no idea where she got it from.

"...I'm sorry."

Smack!!

Rika hit the ground in front of Yozora with her sword as hard as she could after Yozora apologized in a feeble voice.

"Eep..."

I plagiarized
someone else's work

Yozora let out a faint yelp.

"The hell do you mean you're sorry!? You deaf? I'm askin' why the hell you did what you did!!"

"......I thought none of you would ever find out if I copied a little Japanese movie, since you're all a bunch of idiots who've probably never seen any movies aside from some anime or big Hollywood ones."

Yozora said, her lips pursed as though she were pouting.

Smack!!

"Who're you callin' an idiot!? You think it's OK to steal as long as you don't get caught!?"

"Uu..."

"Listen up, ya' goddamn bitch!! Stealin's the one thing an author should *never* do! That's like pissin' all over the work other authors worked their fuckin' asses off to make! You got that!?"

"...I'm very sorry."

Yozora apologized again, in a near-mumble this time.

Smack!!

"You sure you got it, you fuckin' dumbass!?"

"...Uu... I'm really very sorry..."

"I can't hear you! You at least know how to speak, right!? Then do it for fuck's sake!"

SMACKKKK!!

"I'm sorry!! I'm so sorry I plagiarized!!"

"...Keh, you goddamn worms who only know how to steal other people's works are such a pain in my ass. If you're gonna apologize for it later, then don't do it in the first place you sack of shit! You have any idea how much of a pain in the ass you are? Well!?"

Rika continued to insult Yozora, who was now teary-eyed, with a cold look in her eyes as though she were looking at a pile of trash .

"Haaa... I thought it was weird, too. There's no way you could ever write a script that good."

Sena added, with a let-down look on her face, followed by,

"...Anego... you big idiot..."

"Aghua...!?"

Yukimura stared at Yozora with a sad look in her eyes, causing Yozora to make a pained expression on her face.

I've had it done to me too, so I know that having Yukimura look at you like that hurts way more than any insult.

"Uu... I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

Yozora continued to mumble out apologies to us.

Rika then went, "Phew..." and let out a sigh.

She then quickly went back to making a serious face, spit out her gum on a piece of paper, and said,

"So, what should we do now?"

I was a little bewildered by the sudden change from insult mode to her now serious tone of voice.

"Eh, what do you mean?"

"I'm talking about the movie, and whether or not we should continue filming using Yozora's plagiarized script or not. Technically speaking, I don't think there's any real problem with it, even if it is a bald-faced rip-off, since we're not trying to make any money off of it. We're not entering it in a contest or putting it online either. The final product would just be an inferior copy of *The Sun On Top of the Hill*, but we could still keep filming it, if everyone's OK with that."

"Don't be ridiculous!"

Sena completely rejected the choice Rika had just explained.

"I, *the* Sena Kashiwazaki, am not going to make some rip-off movie! We're done with Yozora's script! Let's go with a new one instead!"

In response to Sena's enthusiasm, Rika calmly replied,

"Rika would like to do that too, but making a whole new script now would be..."

"You don't have to worry about that."

"Eh?"

We all looked confused, so Sena puffed out her chest in pride, and declared,

"I secretly prepared a script of my own, just in case that idiot Yozora couldn't write one! I only kept quiet about it up until now to let that idiot Yozora save face!"

"Wow... You're awesome, Sena!"

"Nicely done, Sena-senpai...!"

"I would expect no less from you, Sena-anego."

"Ahaha, Sena's pretty cool~"

Sena made a supremely triumphant look on her face after hearing all the praise we had for her.

"Heheh, that's right! You better be thankful, foolish commoners! "

Sena then looked down at Yozora sitting *seiza*-style on the floor,

"Heh, heh, heh~" and laughed happily.

"Gh..."

Yozora looked irritated as she frowned and looked away from Sena.

"Heh. Hey hey, Yozoraaa~ What's it feel like~? Come on, tell me , widdle Yozowa~ What's it feel like to have everyone find out you ripped off another movie, and then have your role as scriptwriter stolen away from you by me~? What's our pathetic widdle Yozowa feel like right now~!?"

Wow... Sena's merciless...

"...Ughhh... Aghughah..."

Yozora's face was completely red, she had tears in the corners of her eyes, her veins were popping out on her forehead, and her fists were trembling on top of her knees.

Usually Yozora would have flipped out by now, but she was holding herself back, since she was clearly in the wrong this time.

Sena then stooped over Yozora, and said,

"Everybody, look at her~ It's our failure, widdle Yozowa~♪"

Sena then took it a step further, and started lightly smacking Yozora on the cheek.

"!? ~~~~~~!! Ghaugh, Gughhh, Kgogyofgh, Fhoegharghugrraghgouhguoaghooag !!!!!"

Yozora's bloodshot eyes were opened wider than I thought possible as she let out a sound that no girl... no, a sound so terrible that no human should ever make.

"...Yozora."

Sena said, changing to a serious face all of a sudden.

"You better make up for this mess with your acting in the movie ."

"....."

Yozora simply sat there without saying a word.

Sena then got up, and said,

"Heheh, anyway, just do the best you can, OK? In my movie, that is!"

"Kh..."

Yozora groaned in frustration, but I could see there was a light of will in her eyes.

"All right, I'm going home for today! I've gotta fix up the script and all! I'll blow you all away tomorrow!"

Sena said in her usual ridiculously condescending attitude, and then left the room.

And so, that's how the script for the Neighbors Club's movie changed all of a sudden.

We're down to the last two weeks before the school festival.

.....Are we really gonna be OK...?

In The Rika Room

The next day, we began filming our movie again, using Sena's script instead of Yozora's.

The script itself was... well, how to put this..... terrible...

We obviously weren't going to use Yozora's plagiarized script, but this new script was such a mess that it made that first revision of Yozora's script (the one where the little brother got a bunch more scenes) look way better in comparison.

Sena's script had songs, dances, magic, super powers, samurai, a fight in a park, a love scene between two guys, and a plot where the transfer student gets popular. In other words, all the things we said we wanted in the movie when we first started... I'd totally forgotten about all that, and seeing all that stuff jammed into one script was not a pretty sight.

I'm happy Sena tried to put in the stuff we agreed on, but I get the feeling it would've been better if she hadn't.

Still, it's all we've got, so we had no choice but to begin filming using Sena's nonsensical script.

"I caaaan't turn baaack~ This iiiiss~ the wayyyy aaaa maann liiiivess~"

Yukimura was singing in a dull tone of voice while doing a dance like the one you see at the Awa Dance Festival.

She also had a sword hanging down from her waist, and seemed to be satisfied with the way things turned out.

...Still, calling this a "song and dance scene" is a stretch if I've ever seen one.

"Heh... Nice punch...!"

"You're not bad yourself."

Yozora, playing an evil wizard, and our samurai protagonist, Yukimura, had both thrown away their weapons and were in a fist fight, after which they're supposed to become friends.

"Right there! Knock him down! Then fade out and make it look like they did it! Come on!"

They were both wearing a gakuran, despite being a samurai and a wizard, and Rika exploded after seeing the two of them hug each other and say, "That was a nice fight."

I wondered what exactly Rika wanted it to look like they did, and whether or not this scene should count as yuri or BL, but... a moment later I realized thinking about it was a waste of time.

"Kodaka! Make sure you capture my perfect acting on camera!"

"Okay, now explode! Yozora, explode! Huhh!? I told you to explode, so do it! .....Fine, we'll add it in with special effects later."

"Come on Yozora! Can't you make a better stupid face than that!?"

"OK, cut! That scene went well!"

...Sena was bursting with energy now that she was the director.

Actually, it'd probably be better to say she was getting carried away.

At first, Yozora was complaining about Sena's script with a look of disapproval in her eyes, and was only reluctantly following her directions, but she seemed to be enjoying herself now that we'd been filming for a while.

Yukimura and Maria, on the other hand, never said anything about the new script.

Rika had a bit of a strained smile on her face after reading it over, but she was still helping Sena as much as she could.

"Our friendship is bigger than the world itself! Ahh, praise be to our all-knowing and all-powerful goddess Sehna Kasi Wazahki's merciful heart!"

Yozora was now spitting out a bunch of ridiculous lines in an incredibly overdramatic tone of voice while eating a hamburger on a bench and waving her arms around in an exaggerated manner.

"Indeed, this is love! Ahaha, hamburgers are so good! I think hamburgers are amazing, because they have meat patties in them!"

"So this is love!? Is this the goddess' love!? By the way, they use rat meat in hamburgers."

"*Munch munch* *chomp chomp* Ehhh!? They make them out of rat meat!? Hm? Oh, right. Yes, they are the goddess' love and friendship! Hamburgers are so good! I never knew rat meat was so good~"

"Ohh, such excellence! Our goddess! By the way, they also use cat meat. Please bestow upon us your blessings!"

"Gyahh! I like cats, they're cute! I like how cats are cute *and* taste good! Maybe I should catch one to eat later~"

"No, don't. The cat meat thing was a lie."

Maria was sitting next to Yozora and eating a hamburger as well while she said her lines. Of course, none of that stuff about hamburgers was in the script, it was just Yozora and Maria having a conversation in the middle of filming. Although, Yozora's lines were so crazy they wouldn't make sense even if you did take the hamburger talk out.

...The whole time we spent filming was more or less like that.

Honestly speaking, I don't really know what this movie is even about.

In fact, I doubt anyone other than Sena herself does.

And, while piecing a good story together at this point was hopeless, at least the acting had plenty of energy behind it.

However, as I continued filming, I started to feel more and more that a messy movie like this was much more fitting for a homemade movie by a bunch of students like us anyway.

It was now after school on the fourth day after we started filming with the new script.

We were done filming for the day, and Rika and I were currently on our way to the Rika room.

I was carrying the camera, lights, and boom mic, while Rika was carrying her laptop.

Usually we just leave all this stuff in the clubroom, but the equipment was a little weird today, so we were bringing it back to the Rika room to check it out.

It was already pretty dark outside too.

However, there were plenty of students running around trying to finish their projects in what little time they had left before the festival, despite how late it was.

We were walking to the special classrooms building where there were a lot of haunted houses and cafes that needed big rooms set up inside, which gave it a much more unusual atmosphere than the normal classrooms in the other buildings.

I could smell something coming from the home ec. and chemistry rooms.

Hm, now that I think about it, this is the first time Rika and I have walked down the halls together like this.

Sometimes I'll meet up with Yozora or Sena on the way down to the clubroom, but I never have a chance to run into Rika, since she comes from the special classrooms building.

"Ehe, this is the first time we've walked together down the halls like this, isn't it?"

Rika said exactly what I'd just been thinking with a bashful smile on her face.

"Oh, it is?"

I played dumb for no particular reason.

"It is."

"Huh."

"Huh (´･`)"

Rika puffed out her cheeks in displeasure at my reaction.

We reached the Rika room on the second floor a short while later.

"Welcome~"

Rika opened the door with one hand.

This is the first time I've been in this room since I met Rika.

Back then, I heard a loud explosion as I was passing by, so I hurriedly opened up the door and saw a girl in a white lab coat collapsed on the floor who I then carried to the nurse's office.

That was my first meeting with Rika Shiguma.

"Feels like it happened so long ago..."

I murmured to myself, and upon doing so,

"It sure does. It's been 122 days since then."

Rika said all of a sudden.

"...? What are you talking about?"

I asked with an eyebrow raised, to which Rika answered with a smile,

"Today is the 122nd day since Rika met you, Kodaka-senpai."

"...Y-you've been keeping count?"

"No, I just remembered it. More specifically, it's been 122 days, 8 hours, and 37 minutes."

Rika said, this time with a wry smile instead.

..."Counted" and "remembered."

I'm not sure what the difference is between the two.

I decided to take a look around the room.

The room was basically the same as the chemistry rooms I go to for class, but it was only about half the size, and there weren't any chemicals or textbooks on the shelves either, which gave the room a pretty dreary feel to it.

"Not much in here, huh," I said, to which Rika replied,

"Yeah, not on this side anyway."

"*This* side?"

Rika briskly walked across the room to the other side.

There was a door where she stopped, and it had a nameplate on it that had the words "Rika Prep Room" crossed out, and "Sect Σ[1]" written above them.

"Please ignore that little bit."

Rika said in a shy tone of voice after noticing my gaze.

Rika took a key card out of her pocket and swiped it through the card reader beside the door, causing it to open automatically with a beeping sound. ...So, uh, I explained that pretty casually, but this is the first time I've seen a card lock in a school.

"...Wow."

Rika made a wry smile at my admiration, and said,

"I added a bunch of security on it originally because I was treating it like my secret base. There used to be a fingerprint and voice scan on it too, but it started to get annoying, so I got rid of them. It's not like anyone comes here anyway."

"...Wow."

I said, repeating myself.

"Anyway, please go on in."

"...Wow."

I started to worry about the extent of my vocabulary after murmuring my third "wow" this minute.

But anyway, I'd just entered the Rika Prep Room——"Sect Σ" according to what Rika wrote——the inside of which was overflowing with a tremendous amount of things all over the place , nothing like the dreary room next door.

The room was about six tatami mats big, and had a bookshelf filled with what appeared to be various chemicals, a bookshelf full of thin books (probably BL doujinshi), over 10 computer monitors, three gigantic desktop PCs, a desk covered in a bunch of unrecognizable machine parts, a locker, a fridge, a sleeping bag, an expensive looking mesh chair... and a bunch of other stuff too.

"Ah, you can just put that stuff down over there."

"Gotcha."

I placed the filming equipment we'd been using down on top of a desk.

"Ehe, you're the first person besides me that's come in here, Senpai."

Rika said while spinning around in her mesh chair.

"Oh, that so?"

"'Oh, that so?' he says. ...You could at least act a bit more impressed. A girl just let somebody else into her room for the first time, you know."

"...Sorry, but there's no way you'd get anyone to think of this place as a 'girl's room'..."

I pointed out with a stern look on my face, upon which I realized something.

I thought this room had a nostalgic feeling to it, and now I know why. This place is just like Dad's room was whenever he was stressed out over his work.

Of course, there weren't a bunch of computers and monitors in his room, but it had the same general "Researcher's Room" feel to it .

"...Don't you think it's a bit weird to make that tranquil face all of a sudden, Senpai? Wouldn't it make more sense to either get all excited, or get creeped out at how dirty the room is?"

"How on Earth could those two reactions ever apply to the same room...?"

I said with a wry smile, and then added,

"Anyway, good luck with checking over the equipment."

"Ah, please wait a second, Senpai."

Rika called out to me as I was about to leave the room.

"I tried adding a few of the post-production special effects the other day. Can you take a look at them for me?"

Rika said while starting up her computer.

"Oh, really...? Lemme see."

Rika was in charge of editing the video and adding special effects, since there was no way anyone else could do it.

Sena had stuff like "A big explosion here!" and "Shoot a cool beam out of his hand here!" and "Yozora gets cut in two and then a divine light shines down from above here!" and all kinds of other ridiculous instructions written in her script, but Rika said she'd do them all without any hesitation.

Rika tapped some keys on her keyboard, and a few seconds later a scene from our movie started playing on the biggest monitor in the room.

I watched the scene play through... and couldn't help but gulp as I did.

".....Wow."

That was my fourth 'wow'.

The first scene was one where Yozora and Yukimura were fighting each other.

The wizard Yozora was acting as summoned an incredibly realistic-looking giant black dragon and attacked Yukimura with it .

Yukimura counterattacked by swinging her sword at it, and each time she did, bolts of lightning came flying out and chopped away at the black dragon's body.

The dragon then turned its scales into arrows made of black flames and shot them at Yukimura, but Yukimura defended against them as well with a shining rainbow-colored barrier that disintegrated the incoming arrows.

...Back when we were filming this scene, all Yozora was doing was flailing her arms around and laughing like a nutjob while Yukimura swung her sword around and did a weird dance.

It was so ridiculous that I couldn't hold back my laughter when I looked it over before.

However, the special effects turned that weird scene into a completely new one that actually looked like a real battle between a wizard and samurai with superpowers.

The only word that I could think of was 'awesome.'

The rest of the battle scenes were just as amazing as that one. There were other awesome scenes too, like where Sena started to

glow as if she were a real goddess, and one where the school was enveloped in a sea of flames, all of which looked so real it was hard to tell they were CG at first. Honestly, the quality of those effects put the movie at a level far above what you'd expect from something a bunch of high schoolers made in their free time.

"You're really amazing, you know that..."

I said, praising Rika now that the video had stopped playing, and upon doing so Rika's face went bright red.

"Geez, don't be so blunt about it~"

"I can't help it, this really is awesome. ...Wasn't this a lot of work ?"

I'm pretty much clueless when it comes to computers, so I can't really imagine how much work it'd take to do something like this, but I can at least tell that there's no way it was easy for her.

No matter how much of a genius our Rika Shiguma is.

"Hrm... Well, I suppose it took a fair amount of work."

Rika admitted the difficulty of what she'd done with a wry smile.

I'm pretty sure that it was a lot more than just 'a fair amount of work,' too, despite what she'd just said.

"I see... I wish I could help you out, but..."

Browsing the web is about the extent of my computer skills. Something like this would be way out of my league.

"Aha, it's fine. Rika has plenty of time, since she doesn't go to classes."

"I see... But, it's like... I feel bad for making you do all this work alone."

"It's fine~ It's fine~" Rika said while shaking her head.

"I mean, yeah, it's a lot of work, but I like doing it."

"Eh?"

"I've helped companies make games and movies plenty of times before, but... This is the first time I've made something with a bunch of people my age. Rika's really been having a lot of fun."

Rika said along with a tender smile.

That smile sent my heart racing, and I quickly started darting my eyes around to avoid looking at her.

And, as I did, I noticed a binder labeled "Neighbors Club Photos " mixed in among the chaos of BL books, video games, game magazines, and the bunch of other stuff that was on her shelves.

"Photos...?"

"Oh, this?"

Rika grabbed the binder, and opened it up.

"W-what the..."

Inside the binder was a huge number of pictures of me.

They were all taken inside the clubroom from various angles, and were obviously taken in secret as well.

"You...!?"

"My sincerest apologies, but I took a few secret pictures of you."

"Y-you freak! Perv!"

"Please don't get the wrong idea~"

Rika said in a light tone of voice in response to my freaking out, and then flipped to a different page in the binder.

"Eh... These are..."

There weren't just pictures of me, but also pictures of Yozora, Sena, Yukimura, and Maria, all from various angles.

Yozora had long hair in them, and Yukimura was in her old maid outfit.

"You know how we all played that game, 'Romancing Saga' before, right?"

"Hm? Ah, yeah, I remember."

"Romancing Saga" is a multiplayer game Rika helped make that you use a headset to play. I remember it feeling really realistic too; it was like I'd actually gone into the game world.

The version we played was still in production though, so the contents of the game were pretty pathetic...

"These are the photos I used to make a CG model for everyone in that game."

...I remember that.

The characters inside that game looked astonishingly similar to our real selves.

Back then, Rika said, "Rika will just have you all use some character designs I made to look like you ahead of time," like it was nothing, but... No matter how you look at it, there's no way you could make CG models of that quality without any photos or anything without doing a ton of work.

...I can't believe she did all this just so we could play that game together.

Rika's face started to go red again as I continued staring at her, and after a short while she said, in an aloof tone of voice,

"Oh well, cat's out of the bag now, huh? It's kinda embarrassing."

"You..."

Then, all of a sudden, I remembered what Rika told me after we finished playing the game that day.

"Hmm, I'm not sure how to say it, but... I guess it's like, you should avoid playing games with those two."

I said with a wry smile on my face, but then Rika surprised me, and said,

"You think so? Rika had a lot of fun though."

"It was only my first time playing a game with everyone, but it was really fun."

I remember being charmed by the tender smile Rika showed me back then.

And that smile from back then—— was the same as the smile she showed me just now when she said how much fun she was having making this movie with everyone.

Rika Shiguma.

She might actually be—— more serious about making friends than anyone else in the Neighbors Club.

Kobato Hasegawa

It was now Sunday.

The school festival would at last begin next week, and we were already pretty pressed for time, but our filming was halted mid-way nevertheless.

The reason for that being that Sena remembered the middle school division's festival started today, and upon doing so she yelled, insisting that "We've gotta go see Kobato-chan's movie!"

Of course, the rest of us were interested in what Kobato was doing too, and while they may be a few years younger, we were still interested to see what kind of movie our fellow students made , so the six of us all made our way over to the middle school area.

Actually, last night when I brought up the subject with Kobato during dinner, she yelled, "You better not come and see it An-chan !" in a forceful tone of a voice, but... Well, it's only common sense that a parent or older brother would never listen to such a request. Sorry 'bout that, Kobato.

There's a bus that runs to and from the high school and middle school areas, and is in fact the same bus Kobato takes whenever she comes to the clubroom.

Hence, we all got on the bus, and continued on our way to the middle school area.

We spent about 15 minutes on the bus as it rocked gently back and forth before arriving at our destination.

I don't usually come over here, so I couldn't tell you how different it is now that the festival's going on, but there was a sign that said "Saint Chronica Middle School Festival" at the front gates, decorated with a colorful assortment of red and white flowers and string around the edges.

"Ohhh!? Wow!! A festival!? Hey~ Hey~ Onii-chan, is this a festival!?"

Maria let out a yell of joy as we passed through the gates.

"Hm? Well, yeah, it's a festival alright."

"Ahaha, a festival!? They're having a festival at school! Ahahaha !"

"You've gone to high school before, haven't you? Didn't you have a festival there?"

I asked Maria, who was already bouncing off the walls mere seconds after entering, to which she happily replied "Yeah!" along with a nod, and then added,

"But at the school I went to~ All I did was study~"

"I-I see... So then this is your first school festival, right? Wanna get something to eat?"

"Yes! It's a festival, so I want to eat cotton candy!"

"Cotton candy, let's see... Wonder if they have any... Well, I'll buy it for you if we see some."

"Yay~! Onii-chan's gonna buy me cotton candy! I get to eat cotton candy! Ahahaha! Can I get a burger too!?"

"Sure, if they have any."

"Ahaha! Who would've thought I'd get all this stuff today!?"

I looked over our surroundings while patting an overjoyed Maria on the head.

Overall, it felt like a smaller version of the high school festival.

There's only half as many students in the middle school, if I remember right. That's probably why.

There were plenty of visitors walking around, but I didn't see too many high school students like us. The visitors were more made up of other middle schoolers and older men and women who were probably the parents of the students here.

Over on the track, all that was left was a tent that was probably used during their athletic festival last night and a few people walking by. Guess nobody's doing anything for the festival over there.

Anyway, we made our way inside the school, where we ran into students handing out pamphlets that had info about where and when all the events at the festival were taking place.

I grabbed a pamphlet from them, and looked up where and when Kobato's movie was playing.

"Hey, did Kobato ever tell you what kind of movie she was making?" Sena asked me.

"No. She'd never tell me about it even if I asked her anyway. Come to think of it, she doesn't tell me much about what she does at school in general..."

Obviously I'd help her as much as I could if there was something she was worried about, and I'd even go barging into the middle school building if someone was bullying her.

However, Kobato hasn't seemed too worried about anything ever since we moved here, and I thought she'd been doing her best to get along with everyone in her class, despite maybe having some trouble doing so.

I mean, that's what I thought... given her usual attitude and all... but *that* Kobato... is the lead role in her class' movie?

Thinking about it again was making me confused.

In any case, I read through the pamphlet in more detail.

Kobato's in class 2-2.

Class 2-2... Class 2-2...

"Ah, found it. Class 2-2, Movie... *Princess Kobato*– Princess Kobato!?"

I couldn't help but let out a hysteric yell after reading that title.

"I bet that movie's gonna be awesome!"

Sena's eyes were sparkling.

"...No, wait. It's not like Kobato's necessarily the princess."

It just sounds weird because the name is the same as my little sister's. If I think about it rationally, it's not that odd for there to be a book or movie called *Princess Kobato*.

It sounds like it could fit right in with *Princess Shiroyuki* and *Princess Kaguya*.

"How stupid, a poop vampire like her, a princess? They should just call her Princess Poop."

Maria said, seemingly upset about something.

"So, where's Princess Totally-an-Angel Kobato-chan playing?"

"Calm down."

I quickly rebuked Sena, and then checked the time and place.

"Uwa, it's about to start."

Princess Kobato's screening was about five minutes from now in the AV room.

"Says it's in the AV room, Sena."

"What floor is the AV room on!?"

Sena asked in reply for some reason.

"How would I know? Hell, why don't *you* know? You went here up until just two years ago for crying out loud!"

"Huh? I didn't go to the middle school here."

Sena said while giving me a blank stare.

"Eh, you didn't?"

"Nope. I went to a public middle school nearby."

I was a little surprised to hear that.

She's the daughter of this school's chairman, so I figured it only made sense for her to go to school here.

"...Come to think of it, you did take the entrance exam, didn't you... So you didn't go to an escalator school, huh..."

Yozora mumbled in a similarly surprised tone of voice.

"Wait, who cares about that right now!? We need to find the AV room!"

Sena said, as though she honestly couldn't care less about what happened in the past, before taking off at a brisk pace.

Luckily, we quickly found the AV room, and were able to get in just before the movie started playing.

Good thing we did too, because you weren't allowed to enter once the movie started.

According to the pamphlet, the movie was supposed to last an hour.

I thought that giving a self-made movie by a bunch of students that nobody's ever seen before a whole hour was pretty generous of them, but there were actually a lot of people here.

It didn't look like there was anywhere the six of us could sit together, so we broke up and just found our own seats instead.

Sena went straight to the font-row seats.

I found a pair of empty seats a bit farther back, so I decided to sit there with Maria.

Soon after we'd all found our seats, the lights were turned off, causing the whole room to go pitch black.

"We will now begin playing the movie *Princess Kobato* by class 2 -2. Please remain quiet while the movie is playing. Now then, we hope you all enjoy Miss Kobato's brilliant acting."

.....Hm?

After the announcement, a bunch of people in the audience started clapping.

I thought the announcement had a weird part in it at the end there, but I clapped along with everyone else anyway.

"Ahaha, a movie! A movie!"

Maria happily laughed while clapping with the rest of the crowd.

A white light was then projected onto the screen—— and at last, the movie began.

Princess Kobato was true to its title. Kobato was a princess.

"Seriously!?"

...is what I wanted to yell, but held back as I watched the film.

While I can't deny that being related to Kobato, and knowing what she's really like, made the whole thing seem a bit silly to me, it was definitely not a bad movie—— In fact, it was actually pretty dang good.

The plot was simple; it began with a beautiful princess living alone in a castle deep in the woods.

Several young men who heard rumors of her came to propose, but they were each given a near-impossible task to complete if they wished to marry her.

None of the men were able to fulfill the princess' desires, and eventually the princess left to go to the moon——

Basically, it was a fictional piece that used *Princess Kaguya* as a motif, and was similar to *Princess Kaguya* in that I had no idea what message they were trying to convey with the story.

The movie was in black and white.

There was background music where it mattered, but there were no voices, and the characters' lines were all done with subtitles.

I thought it might be a bit too drab for something a bunch of middle schoolers made, but the lead actress'—— that is, Kobato's performance gave the piece more than enough vibrance.

The costumes and set pieces didn't stand out much on account of the black and white, and while everyone's acting probably wasn't that great, the lines all being silent made a really good atmosphere for the movie as a whole.

Also, on scenes where characters would just talk a lot, they got creative and moved the camera around. That careful attention to make sure your viewers don't get bored is something I doubt I would've noticed if I hadn't been doing a lot of filming myself recently.

I don't know enough about movies to give an authoritative review or anything, but I think that the way they used their low budget and weak acting skills to their advantage, rather than let it hinder them, was impressive, and that the movie was pretty amazing overall.

Their movie was completely different than ours too, which relied on Sena's money and Rika's technical skills to try and force our movie to look amazing.

Princess Kobato is definitely what a self-made movie by a bunch of students is meant to look like.

Both movies have a fairly weak story, but when I really think about it, *Princess Kobato* is much better in that it really tries to show the princess' charm to the viewer.

It might be a bit much to say this, but this movie is like class 2-2' s serious attempt at making a Kobato promotion video, while our movie is a nonsense story that's hardly got any sense of direction to it.

...I bet they put a ton of time, effort, and passion into making this movie together...

Honestly—— it felt like we'd totally lost.

I was sitting in my seat in awe for a while after the movie ended , but I couldn't sit there all day, so I woke up Maria in the seat next to me (she fell asleep; it was a good movie, but I guess it was boring for a little girl), and then left the AV room.

Yozora, Sena, Yukimura, and Rika were waiting just outside.

"That was a brilliant work of art. A fitting piece for your little sister, Aniki."

Yukimura said with a meek look on her face.

"....."

It looked like Yozora was impressed or something, because she was just standing there quietly with a serious look on her face.

"I love new SFX techniques, but that retro-style isn't bad either..."

Rika nodded with a satisfied look on her face. Guess she was impressed by the movie too.

"By the way Kodaka-senpai, what does SFX turn into if you add an extra line to the F?"

"SAX."

"...Maybe, but don't you think there's an even better letter you could've made?"

Rika said with a disappointed look on her face.

"Ahh, Kobato-chan was so cute! Kobato-chan's a total princess! I just wanna eat her up!"

Sena seemed to be just happy she got to see Kobato in her movie. I bet she's the kind of viewer that movie makers like.

Anyway, we continued talking amongst ourselves until,

"Man~ Miss Kobato's so awesome! She's totally like a goddess!"

"The guests all totally loved you~"

"Wasn't it awesome how many people we got for the first showing? We might not even have enough seats for the next one after everyone starts talking about it."

"Maybe we should've sold tickets! Shoulda known how popular *the* Miss Kobato would be!"

The door to the AV room's equipment room opened up, and several middle schoolers came out while happily talking to each other.

They must be from class 2-2.

And the girl standing in the middle of that circle, being pampered by all the students around her while making a faintly uncomfortable-looking frown on her face——

"KO. BA. TO. CHUWAAA

The girl with the blond hair and heterochromatic eyes Sena was screaming and waving at—— was none other than Kobato.

"Ugeh."

Kobato's faintly uncomfortable expression faded away, and was replaced with one that looked like she was utterly disgusted.

She wasn't wearing her usual goth loli clothes like she does at home or at club, but was wearing the normal middle school division uniform instead. The cross-shaped pendant she got from Maria was still hanging down from her neck.

Sena lunged towards Kobato, completely ignoring all the other students around her, all the while waving her hand.

"Wh- Eh- Wha!? Melons!?"

"Holy crap... her boobs are friggin' huge..."

The middle schoolers all backed away from Sena.

Sena gave Kobato a big hug, and then yelled,

"Kobato-chan I missed you so much! Kobato-chan you're so cute , Kobato-chan you're totally an angel, Kobato-chan you're totally a princess! Ahhh I love love love you! Kobato-chan let me sniff you! Huuu Haaa Huuu Haaa♥"

"Gauuu... Let go of me ya' damn moron! Why're you here!? And An-chan, I told ya' not ta' come didn't I!?"

Kobato saw me and started launching her complaints while trying to escape from Sena with a face that looked like she was about to cry.

Then, all of a sudden, one of the middle school girls came over to me.

She had pretty eyes, and seemed like a nice girl in general.

"Um, might you be Kobato-chan's older brother I've heard so much about!?"

"Eh? Yeah, I am."

I was a little concerned about that "heard so much about" part, but she came over to me so suddenly I forgot to make a remark about it.

I'm really not good with people coming up and talking to me all of a sudden.

"You saw the movie, right!? How was it!? Wasn't Kobato totally awesome in it!?"

"Eh, ah, yeah... You guys did awesome, making a movie like that."

I told her what I honestly thought, after which the girl waved her hand at Kobato and said,

"Kobato-chaaaan! Your brother said your movie was totally awesome!"

Kobato then looked over at me for an instant, but quickly started to blush and looked down at the ground instead.

Sena, who was still clinging to Kobato, gave her a bunch of praise too, like, "I thought you were super awesome too, Kobato-chan! Your movie was great!"

"Hey~ Sena~! Give it a rest already, we're leaving now!"

Sena reluctantly released Kobato after hearing me trying to hurry her along.

Kobato immediately screamed "Moron!!" as she ran into the AV room's equipment room, and I heard the sound of her locking the door once she got in.

"...Ahh... Sorry 'bout her," I said, apologizing to the girl.

"It's fine! It was an honor to meet Kobato-chan's big brother!"

The girl happily said, acting somewhat shy.

I then decided to ask the girl something that'd been on my mind for a while now.

"Hey, um..... Is Kobato, like... really popular?"

"Of course!"

She answered me immediately.

"Everyone in our class is a huge Kobato fan! Kobato-chan's even making fans out of people from other classes and other grades!"

"I see..."

It's probably true if her classmate says so.

She always comes over to the high school building after class, and she'd always say "The darkness is my only companion." when I asked her about it, so I'd just assumed she had no friends, but this is, well, pretty surprising.

It's surprising, but, I'm glad.

"Well, I hope you get along with her from now on too."

"I will!" the girl exclaimed with a nod, but then her expression clouded over for some reason.

"Hm?"

"...Well, umm, we all really wanna get along with Kobato-chan, but Kobato-chan acts like she might not really like us that much sometimes... It's just, kinda like, a little sad."

"She acts like that?"

"Yeah. It's like, we all say how much we love her, but she won't take us seriously. Or like, the closer we try to get, the more she pulls away. We all love that shy side of Kobato-chan too though."

The girl then let out a gasp, and said,

"Ah, sorry about that! It's not like I'm insulting her! Kobato-chan's seriously our idol! Really! Anyway, gotta go!"

The girl gave me a quick bow and walked off to the AV room.

"So, what do you guys wanna do——"

next, is what I was about to say, but before I could,

————Squeeze.

Somebody started pulling at my sleeve.

"...Maria?"

Maria was grabbing my sleeve while looking down at the ground for some reason.

"What's wrong?"

I asked, to which Maria replied with her cheeks puffed out a bit,

"...Muu... That wasn't really fun..."

"...? Wanna get some food then? I think I saw a cotton candy place in the pamphlet."

"Yeah... I want cotton candy..."

Maria seemed deflated as she replied to my offer with a nod.

I then heard Rika mumbling something to herself.

"...Won't take you seriously... Pulls away the more you push... Hrm... They're definitely siblings alright..."

"Hm? What'd you say?"

"Nothing at all~"

Rika shook her head, and said,

"By the way, Senpai. Rika wants to eat a chocolate banana, but the stimulation from seeing how sexy Rika looks when eating a banana might be too much for all the middle school boys here, don't you think?"

"Heh."

"You just scoff at me!? Not even an actual reply!?"

After the movie, we went around and got some cotton candy, chocolate bananas, takoyaki, yakisoba, and some other stuff to eat before heading back to the high school building just after noon.

After all, we'd already finished our main goal of seeing Kobato's movie, and the shock from seeing just how good their movie was was also a big reason why we didn't stay long.

We're not gonna just let them beat us like that.

Yozora and Yukimura seemed to feel the same way, because they put more spirit than usual into their acting that afternoon.

Sena seemed more energetic than usual too, possibly because she'd finally gotten a dose of Kobato again.

...However, Maria alone seemed to be just as downhearted as before.

Later that evening, we finished the filming we'd been doing at a park near school, and were greeted by a single girl upon making a quick stop back at the clubroom.

"Kukuku... I've been waiting for you... My fellow clans***men***..."

It was Kobato Hasegawa, changed back into her usual goth loli outfit.

"GYAHHHHHHHHH!!"

Maria let out a big scream with a smile on her face upon seeing Kobato.

"Poop vampire! The poop vampire is here! Ahaha! I'm gonna kill you vampire!"

Maria got excited all of a sudden and merrily lunged at Kobato while swinging her cross at her. It was as though her listless attitude from before had never happened.

"Kukuku... You still dare to oppose me? Foolish pawn of G- Ow!!"

Kobato started tearing up after receiving Maria's sudden attack.

"Fungyahhh! Why do you always jump at me like that all of a sudden, you moron!? Taste my true power that has surpassed even God's!

Kobato joined Maria, and they began attacking each other with their crosses.

I couldn't help but want to smile as I saw them begin another one of their boisterous holy wars.

Then, all of a sudden, Sena yelled, with a big fat smile on her face,

"Alright, let's get moving! We're gonna start filming all of Kobato's scenes right away!"

"Kobato's scenes!? Kobato has scenes!?"

"Obviously. You know all those scenes you did in place of Kobato? We're gonna re-do 'em all with her instead, now that she's here!" Sena casually replied to my outburst.

"I was just a substitute!? You never told me that!!"

"Come on, come on! The sunset right now is perfect, let's get going!"

Sena completely ignored my complaints, and left the clubroom.

Yozora, Rika, and Yukimura all followed suit.

Kobato and Maria took a break from their holy war too.

"Allow me to show you why my magic is revered far and wide, accursed holy woman!"

"Khhh~! I'll slaughter you with my holy acting skills!"

They then continued arguing with each other as they left the clubroom.

"Come on Kodaka! Get a move on!"

Sena called for me from outside the room.

I let out a deep sigh, grabbed the camera and other equipment, and left the clubroom.

And so, for the first time in a long while, we began a club activity with all Neighbors Club members present.

King Lear

It was now Friday morning. It's been five days since the middle school festival ended, and Kobato's been filming with us ever since .

Normally we'd all have a short homeroom period right now, but all students of the Saint Chronica high school division were instead lined up on the track in our gym uniforms.

Today is the long-awaited first day of the Saint Chronica Academy high school division's festival—— the day of the athletics festival.

The teams were broken up into five colors: red, white, blue, yellow, and green, and our team, the green team, was made up of classes 1-5, 2-5, and 3-5, with everyone on our team wearing a green headband.

"——We shall begin our athletics festival on this wonderful autumn day without a cloud in the sky. Students, now is the time to show the fruits of all the hard work you've done for this day——"

A beautiful voice rang out across the entire track from a microphone on the stage in front of us.

The person speaking into the microphone right now was the student council president, who was giving her little greeting speech.

However, despite what she'd just said, there were, in fact, several clouds in the sky, the wind was pretty strong, it wasn't very warm, and on top of all that, most students were busy preparing for the cultural festival side of things, not the athletics festival, which is more of a formality than anything. The only people who did any practice for it were the ones who already practice daily anyway, so I doubt that anyone even had any fruits to show, but I guess you're not supposed to point that out.

The speech was pretty much just a template of the same stuff you always hear at these kinds of things, but strangely enough, it had a certain charm to it that made you want to listen.

Come to think of it, I didn't even know our student council president was a girl until now.

I'm a transfer student, so I obviously didn't go to the entrance ceremony, and this school doesn't have ceremonies for the end of each semester either. I've also never had a reason to get involved with the student council, so this was really my first time seeing her .

She had pure black hair, and part of it was tied into braids and bundled up on the back of her head.

She was certainly pretty, and had an air of refinement to her as well, but she didn't have even a hint of the harsh impression Yozora does, nor was she so flashy as to be unapproachable like Sena. She also had, as I mentioned before, a nice clean voice, as well as a nice and friendly atmosphere about her.

To sum it all up—— She had the kind of appearance that anybody, young or old, man or woman, would like the instant they saw her, and honestly, I was pretty jealous of her for that.

I don't really like to get all negative like this, but I couldn't help but think how much easier my life would be if I had that kind of friendly appearance too.

Anyway, the stage she was standing on also had teachers, the event organizers, and the first-aid team on it as well, and among those people was the baby wolf-like girl I'd met a few days ago, the student council treasurer, Aoi Yusa.

Yusa was standing ramrod straight, and the way she was so obviously nervous with her face all stiff was actually kinda funny.

遊佐葵
《ゆさ・あおい》

日高日向
《ひだか・ひなた》

体育祭、開幕

After the StuCo president gave her speech, the chairman came to give his (usually the chairman's speech is a really long and boring one, but he wrapped his up surprisingly quickly), after which the opening ceremony speech was given, and once we'd finished our warm-up stretches, the athletics festival began at long last.

That said, the only events I was participating in were the class vs. class tug-of-war competition and the relay race, so I wouldn't be doing anything soon.

There was a general listless mood in the air among the students as everyone got ready for the first event, the 200 meter sprint, as well, except for the cheering squads, who somehow managed to muster up the energy to get all fired up and beat on their drums and stuff.

It was just like Yozora said before, looks like nobody really gets too excited for the athletics festival here.

Anyway, as I was walking around our class' little area trying to stay quiet, I spotted Yozora standing off on the edge of the track in the shade.

"Yo."

"...Ahghh?"

I was met with a zombie-like groan of a reply after calling out to Yozora, who seemed even more melancholic than usual.

"...Oh, Kodaka..... Hahh... Maybe I should just go home now... "

"Already? Seriously?"

I made a wry smile at Yozora, who was already planning on leaving despite the fact that the festival had just started, and then said,

"I'm kinda surprised you actually even showed up at all."

"Hmph... I only came on a whim."

Yozora said as though she were pouting with her lips pursed.

"...Now that I'm here though, I wish I would've skipped. Having to see that irritating woman first thing in the morning was awful."

"Irritating woman?"

I asked in return, causing Yozora to start twitching with what appeared to be annoyance.

"...The woman who gave the speech at the opening ceremony."

"Umm... Do you mean the student council president? What'd she do to you?"

"Just hearing about her pisses me off."

"Eh? Do you not get along with her?"

Yozora doesn't even seem to do anything where she'd run into her.

"...I've never talked to her, but I hate her to death."

"Huh?"

Yozora's expression filled with even more hatred after she gave me her nonsense answer.

"...Hinata Hidaka, a senior. She's incredibly popular, and has been the student council president for two years now. She's incredibly athletic, and often serves as a stand-in for several of the sports clubs at their matches and such. She's also very kind, and people say that she hardly ever turns down requests for her help, despite how busy she is. Of course, she's loved by both her juniors and fellow classmates as well."

"She sounds like a friggin' great person! Hell, you could probably call her a saint."

Yozora nodded in agreement.

"Yes, that's exactly right. Hinata Hidaka... She is what it means to be a true normal... Back when I was a freshman, I thought that both her and Meat were the two peerless normals of this school, and thus viewed them as my enemies. However, unlike Meat, that woman is incredibly popular with girls as well. And, seeing as how I now know that Meat is unmatched in how pathetic she is, it is Hinata Hidaka alone who stands at the top of the world of normals—— she truly is befitting of being called King Lear."[2]

"King Lear...? Wait, isn't that the title of some book?"

I asked, to which Yozora gave a small nod, and then casually explained,

"It's one of Shakespeare's four great tragedies. It's a story about an old king who is betrayed by the ones he loved, and then lives out his final years as a vagrant, ultimately meeting a pathetic end after experiencing many tragedies. Aside from Lear, most of the other characters in the story die too."

"That's a terrible nickname to give somebody!"

That might even be worse than Sena's "Meat."

"...I came up with it in the hopes that her life would end like his. ...Anyway, it's awful just being in the same school as her. Every time I see her, I'll wait till she goes by me, and then glare at her from behind, or quietly click my tongue at her, or something like that."

"H-holy crap are you petty..."

Oh man... this is just... pathetic.

I kinda wanted to start crying at how my once-manly childhood friend (who was actually a girl) had changed so much.

Actually, now that I think about it, she's only been getting worse recently...

She's always had plenty of pathetic habits, like talking to her air friend, but I get the feeling that she isn't even trying to hide them anymore now.

Back when I'd just transferred in, she at least *looked* perfect. I mean, she was like an intelligent, hard-to-approach cool beauty to me, but now... It's strange... When did she turn into such a hopeless case...

"...Arghh, just talking about her is pissing me off and making my stomach hurt and making me wanna throw up. I'm gonna go rest in the nurse's office."

Yozora's complexion actually did seem a little worse as she walked off.

"Just how much do you hate normals anyway..."

Anyway, I decided to leave as well, taken aback by Yozora's attitude, and headed over to our class' tent.

But then, all of a sudden, at the edge of my vision—— I saw something white flapping on the roof of the school building.

It was a lab coat—— a girl in a lab coat, to be precise.

"...What the heck is she doing way up there?"

Generally speaking, students aren't allowed into the building during the athletics festival, but I got in quite easily on account of having spotted sister Kate walking around nearby.

"Please try to refrain from stealing girls' underwear and uniforms, getting dressed in them, putting them on your head, and then splooging all over them, Onii-chan," was the moronic warning she gave me, which I pretended I didn't even hear, and quickly walked through the halls up to the roof.

The instant I opened the door to the roof, a strong wind blew right at me, causing me to scrunch up my face reflexively.

It was much windier and colder up here on the roof.

I went outside though, and closed the door behind me.

The door made a loud "BANG" as it closed due to the strong wind.

"Owah!?"

The girl in the lab coat leaning against the railing as she looked down at the track—— that is, Rika Shiguma let out a yelp and quickly turned around to face me.

"Huh...? Senpai? Why are you up here?"

"Uh, ya' know... that's my line here."

I said in response to Rika's question.

"Well~ I just wanted to stand out in the wind a bit," said Rika.

I then saw what Rika was wearing, and made a frown.

"...What the heck are you wearing?"

I couldn't tell from down on the track, but Rika was wearing a gym uniform beneath her lab coat, except she was wearing a pair of black bloomers instead of the black spats that are part of the school's regulation gym uniform.

She didn't have her glasses on, but her hair was in a ponytail, just like it was when I first met her.

Come to think of it, I think this is the first time I've seen Rika in her lab coat in a while.

Rika made an embarrassed smile, her cheeks tinged a light shade of red.

"Rika decided to put on a gym uniform too, since it's the athletics festival and all. Does it suit me?"

Honestly she looked incredibly good in it, and I wished she'd take off the lab coat, but instead of telling her that, I said,

"I'm pretty sure they'd give you a spare gym uniform if you went to the nurse's office. Heck, why don't you just join the festival while you're at it? There's stuff you can sign up for the day of too."

However Rika shook her head, and replied,

"It's OK, I've still got work to do. I wouldn't join even if I didn't though."

We just barely managed to finish filming our movie last night.

We left all the editing up to Rika and went home, but...

"...Did you not go home yesterday? Hell, did you even sleep?"

I noticed that Rika had dark bags under her eyes.

"Ah, you found out, huh? I suppose I should've put on a pair of fake glasses or something."

Rika awkwardly made a wry smile.

"...You know, um..."

Sorry for making you do all the work, is what I was about to say , but I decided to think of something else after remembering what Rika told me before.

In the end, I told her,

".....——Thanks for doing so much stuff for us, Rika."

A surprised expression found its way to Rika's face for an instant.

A moment later, her face went red as a beet.

"Geez~! You little~! Didn't I tell you to stop throwing those fastballs at me out of nowhere~!?"

"Not sure how else you want me to say it..."

I said, surprised by Rika's reaction.

Rika then said, as though trying to change the subject as soon as possible,

"Ah, look, the next race is starting!"

She then pulled out a pair of binoculars from one of her lab coat's pockets, and looked down at the track again.

As she did, I heard the faint "Bam!" of a starting gun.

Looks like the 200 meter sprint just got started.

"Ah, Sena-senpai's already out there."

Rika said while looking through her binoculars.

I looked down at the track too after hearing that, and sure enough, Sena was down there running.

Sena's hair was easy to spot as it swayed in the wind, even from all the way out here, and it even looked like it was giving off little golden particles.

"Woah~ Those things really can bounce, can't they~..... Tch."

Rika sounded a little jealous as she described what was going on down on the track.

"Where the heck are you looking..."

It wasn't long before Sena reached the goal line, way ahead of the other runners.

She then ran both hands through her hair, as though trying to show off her perfect win to everybody, and took the first place flag from one of the boys helping to run the festival as though it were hers to begin with.

Every single little move she made had a certain flashiness to it.

"Haa~ Sena-senpai really is amazing, isn't she~"

Rika pulled the binoculars away from her eyes, turned away from the track, and leaned back against the rail.

"Yeah, sure is," I said as I continued to look down at the track.

But then, all of a sudden,

"By the way, Kodaka-senpai, how do you feel about Sena-senpai ?"

Rika threw that fastball at me out of nowhere like it was nothing.

"W-what do you mean... she's just a fellow club member."

"Even though you're engaged?"

"...That's all in the past now."

"Oh yeah...?"

Rika made a face that looked like she was thinking about something.

"...Doesn't seem like it is for Sena-senpai though."

"Eh? What'd you say?"

I asked Rika, who'd mumbled something under her breath, and then, all of a sudden, Rika looked at me with a scornful, hostile, horribly cold look in her eyes.

She then looked up at the sky, and then whispered in an emotionless voice, as though talking to herself,

"——Always gets lonely, but is scared of having others show they honestly care."

"——Pretends not to notice. Pretends not to hear."

"——Runs away. Brushes it off. Avoids the issue. Refuses."

"——Even turns to self-deception, spinning lies such as 'There's no way anybody likes me.' "

"...Ahh, you mean Kobato? Yeah, you're right, she does act like that sometimes, doesn't she... She's always been shy. Looks like she still is too, based on what we saw a few days ago."

I said to Rika with a bitter smile on my face, knowing full-well that wasn't what she meant.

I couldn't tell if she was listening to me or not, but she soon lowered her gaze from the sky down to the concrete ground we were standing on. She then made a vague expression on her face

that looked like she was both crying and laughing, and said, not as though criticizing me, but rather, as though soothing me, in a gentle, affectionate tone of voice,

"——Don't give me that 'What'd you say?' crap, iii~diot..."

Rika's lips then twisted into a smile as she stared at me with dark, empty eyes as cold as space.

She'd thrown away her mask of being "That weird junior that's always energetic and always saying ridiculous stuff." The Rika before me now was one I've never seen before.

Rika then continued while acting as though she were giggling.

"...If that's what you want, Kodaka-senpai, then Rika will continue acting like she has been. It's not like I don't enjoy BL, mecha, and sexy stuff. And acting hyper, and having you always act so blunt with me is fun in its own way, too. But you know, Kodaka-senpai——"

"Don't you think it's about time we move on? I mean——"

"Stop it!"

I unintentionally let out a wild yell.

I absolutely cannot let her finish that sentence.

If she did, I'd, we'd... **have no choice but to move on**.

And moving on... means changing.

That is an incredibly scary thing.

It's truly terrifying, like moving from a bright, warm room into a world of darkness that leaves you completely blind.

It's not just me either.

I'm sure it's the same for Yozora, Sena, Yukimura, and Rika too.

Those words are ones that could bring about an irreversible change that would shake the Neighbors Club itself.

That change would truly be irreversible—— it can't even be compared to trivial problems like a memory from 10 years ago, or a pre-arranged marriage.

"...Hahh." Rika let out a fleeting sigh as she went completely silent.

I let out a tiny sigh myself, and said, "...I'm gonna go now," as I walked off.

I'd gotten away from Rika—— and just as I put my hand on the knob to the roof's door,

"I mean, aren't we all——"

Rika whispered something behind me.

In a voice that sounded like it was shaking—— like it was crying.

My entire body shook with terror.

However, that very instant,

Luckily—— whether or not it was truly lucky, I don't know, but ——a wind far stronger than before roared across the rooftop, and erased Rika's words.

And I, like the coward I am, sighed a breath of relief.

I turned only my head around to face Rika.

"——Eh? What'd you say?"

That's what I told her, playing dumb once again.

However, what I'd said was not a question, it was my answer.

And the girl, who was wiser than anyone else in the Neighbors Club, who could tell what people were thinking——whether she wanted to or not——simply made a sad smile, and said nothing in response.

I opened the door, and left the roof behind me.

All the while telling myself I'd made the right choice.

...But I knew what those words lost in the wind really were.

...I'd known what they were for a long, long time now.

References

1. ↑ Sigma is pronounced as "shiguma" in Japanese, which is also Rika's surname.
2. ↑ King Lear is pronounced, "Ria Ou" in Japanese, which also sounds like "King of the Normals" (Normals = Riajuu, Ou = King).